

## The Third Stage of Life Your Dedication Makes You Shine

*This is the third installment of a discussion series featured in the Seikyo Shimbun, the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper. Participants in this installment are SGI President Ikeda, Seikyo Shimbun General Editorial Bureau Senior Director Osamu Matsuoka and Vice Director Katsusuke Sasaki.*

**IKEDA:** Nine years ago, on my 60th birthday, Konosuke Matsushita (1894–1989), the brilliant entrepreneur and founder of Matsushita Electric, sent me a letter of congratulations. It read in part: “Please regard today as the start of a period of even greater and more fulfilling activity. I pray that you will enjoy lasting good health and strive with the spirit of creating a Soka Gakkai all over again as you continue to devote yourself to world peace and the happiness and prosperity of all humanity.”

At the time he wrote that, Mr. Matsushita was 93. His frank good wishes struck a deep chord in me; I knew only too well the spirit in which they were written.

**MATSUOKA:** They are the words of a great pioneer. And they came true, didn't they? Through your tireless devotion to the development of the SGI, Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism has now spread to some 128 countries and territories, with members around the globe working for the happiness and prosperity of their local communities. Just as Mr. Matsushita said, you have created not only another but an even larger organization dedicated to peace, culture and education.

**SASAKI:** When Austregésilo de Athayde (1898–1993), former president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters and one of the drafters of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, met you for the first time, he was 94 years old.

**IKEDA:** I was deeply humbled when I learned that this venerable champion of human rights had arrived at Rio de Janeiro's Galeão International Airport to wait for my arrival two hours before my flight was due. One of our SGI representatives had urged him to rest in a special waiting room, but, implying he wasn't tired, he said with a smile: “I have been waiting for President Ikeda for 94 years. Another two hours is of no importance.”

**MATSUOKA:** A *Seikyo Shimbun* photographer later described for me your first meeting with President Athayde. It was his first time covering one of your visits overseas. There were no senior photographers with him at the airport, so he was very nervous in the presence of President Athayde. The frail Brazilian activist had been standing with the support of two assistants on either side of him, but the moment you arrived, President Athayde stood erect and walked unaided to greet you. It was a very moving encounter. Fortunately, the photographer captured that wonderful moment in a picture that later appeared in the *Seikyo Shimbun*.

**IKEDA:** President Athayde had the demeanor of a magnificent old lion who had won many battles. In the course of his life, he wrote more than 50,000 newspaper columns. He appeared on the radio weekly for 30 years and on television for 20. And he also gave lectures almost weekly for some 40 years.

While declaring “I have lived long enough, and so I have no fear of death,” he promised not to die before our dialogue was completed. He kept working on it until just a week before he was hospitalized for the last time. A little more than six months after our first meeting, I received the news that this great luminary in the struggle for human rights had died [Sept. 13, 1993]. Yet his fiery declarations of truth and justice still echo in my mind.

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**SASAKI:** Many have read your dialogue, which was published in Japanese as *Nijuisseiki no Jinken o Kataru* (Dialogue on Human Rights in the 21st Century.)

**MATSUOKA:** Last month, the Brazilian Academy of Letters, of which you, President Ikeda, are a nonresident member, celebrated its centennial with much pomp and splendor at its former headquarters in Rio de Janeiro. Soka Gakkai Vice President Hiromasa Ikeda attended the festivities on your behalf, and he had the opportunity to speak with Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and many other distinguished guests on that occasion.

### **Warriors for Human Rights**

**IKEDA:** Next year [1998] I will be 70. Compared to President Athayde's age when we met, I am still a youngster! I plan to keep exerting myself with boundless courage and vigor.

Nelson Mandela spent more than 10,000 days behind bars. When finally released from prison, he was over 70, yet he continued his struggle to transform his country and took on the onerous responsibility of president of a new South Africa. I have met President Mandela. He is a man of great dignity, radiating the energy of one who has dedicated his life to the causes of freedom and equality.

**MATSUOKA:** When President Mandela came to Japan, he took time out of his busy schedule to meet with you at the *Seikyo Shimbun* head office in Tokyo.

**IKEDA:** My impression of him was of a towering and invincible warrior for human rights. A life dedicated to such noble ideals as his shines. When I think of the noble lives of our first two presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, I cannot permit myself to stand still for even the briefest moment.

Mr. Makiguchi was 57 when he encountered and embraced faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism. He later wrote of his tremendous emotion when he took that first great step: "With indescribable joy, I transformed the way I had lived my life for almost 60 years. The anxiety of searching in the dark for life's answers completely evaporated, and my inborn reserve and diffidence disappeared. My goals in life became increasingly grander and loftier, and my fears dwindled."

Mr. Makiguchi was 59 when he founded the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai [Society for Value-Creating Education], the forerunner of the present Soka Gakkai, in November 1930. Today, someone that age would be on the verge of retirement. But what makes Mr. Makiguchi great is that at 59, he was just beginning!

From that time on, he held high the banner of value-creation and fought for the happiness of the people and for a peaceful society. He remained committed to his lofty ideals until his death at age 73 in prison, where Japanese militarists had confined him.

The indestructible starting point of the Soka Gakkai was built by Mr. Makiguchi's unceasing struggle in his final years. He carried out this great labor, his true goal and purpose in life, during the period we now call the third stage of life.

**SASAKI:** We all know how, in his last letter from prison, Mr. Makiguchi wrote, "I am avidly reading the work of Kant." To the last day of his life, he had a youthful spirit, dedicated to continual growth.

### **Accomplishing Something Every Day**

**IKEDA:** Mr. Toda once said that, before going to prison, the elderly Mr. Makiguchi was astonishingly active. He commented with real feeling that if a three-month interval went by between the time you'd last seen Mr. Makiguchi, you'd find that he hadn't been standing still but had advanced three months. Mr. Makiguchi's life was based on the spirit of true cause, of advancing from this moment on. He fought unceasingly without ever retreating a single step. Nor did this spirit change in the slightest under the harsh conditions of prison life.

**MATSUOKA:** Mr. Toda died at 58, partly because his health was weakened by his nearly

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two years in prison.

**IKEDA:** To us today, 58 seems like a short lifetime. But brief as it may have been, in that time President Toda secured the foundation for the entire future course of kosen-rufu. His life was one struggle after another, up to the very last. And just before his death, he held a dress rehearsal for us youth [March 16, 1958], so that we would have a taste of what it will be like when kosen-rufu is achieved. He then entrusted the completion of his mission to the youth division. He gave his life to kosen-rufu, up to the moment of his death. He was truly majestic in his commitment.

To achieve our supreme goal in the end, as the culmination and completion of our life's work — this is the aim to which we should aspire in the third stage of our lives.

**SASAKI:** Your life has also been a constant struggle to advance and then advance further still.

**IKEDA:** Since becoming Mr. Toda's disciple 50 years ago, I have never rested from my labors for even a single day. Objectively speaking, in that half-century, I could easily have collapsed at any time. I was fortunate to encounter Buddhism when I was 19, and then after Mr. Toda's death I devoted all my energies to carrying out the mission he bequeathed to me. My constitution was weak, and I had been told by my doctor that I would probably not live beyond 30. That I have remained active over all these years is a result of the tremendous beneficial power of my faith and practice of Buddhism.

And it was precisely because I didn't think I had long to live that I tried to accomplish everything I had to each day, never putting anything off. Life's uncertainty motivated me in my pursuit of the goal of kosen-rufu.

Back in the fall of 1985, I went into the hospital for 10 days for a heart checkup. But even then, I continued to direct activities for kosen-rufu from my hospital bed. I deeply felt at that time that my hospitalization was a manifestation of the great compassion of the Daishonin, the original Buddha. I was convinced that it happened in order to show me that the time had come to rise up once again and begin the true culmination of my life's work. I was determined to work 10 times, no, 100 times harder than I had before.

It was the time to say what had to be said. It was the time to leave behind guidance on all subjects for later generations. And it was the time to thoroughly communicate to the world the truth about the Soka Gakkai and its wonderful significance and spirit. My feelings have not changed in the least to this very day.

**MATSUOKA:** We all see how selflessly you work day after day and the incredible struggle you are waging, and of course we worry for your health. I remember when you visited a forest in France's Loire region, and you took a deep breath of the air and said quietly to yourself: "What wonderful air! I know if I could stay here for just a little while, it would do wonders for my health. But I just can't...."

**IKEDA:** I'm afraid I just don't have the time for quiet recuperation. Anyway, my daily struggles for kosen-rufu have strengthened me physically, allowing me to enjoy good health. I am older than Mr. Toda was when he died. I passed the landmark age of 60, and the third stage of my life is just beginning. I am prepared to keep on going, with the spirit that this is the most important period of my life.

As the lives of Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda so eloquently illustrate, what matters is that we continue to develop an ever more expansive state of life and greater human brilliance with each passing year. That is the model for the third stage of life that they have left for us to follow.

**SASAKI:** Yes. Life is a continuing series of changes and more changes. If confronted with some momentous problem or crisis, we should look at it as an opportunity for a new start and

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continue to move forward. The important thing is to devote ourselves fully to the present and the future and to live victorious lives filled with the joy of mission and a sense of accomplishment.

**MATSUOKA:** In the course of our lives, we will encounter many trials, challenges and crossroads. Our response and decisions at such times reveal our true mettle.

### **Each Time We Face a Trial**

**IKEDA:** If we triumph at a crucial moment, then in accord with the Buddhist principle of consistency from beginning to end, we will enter a sure path of victory in life. In fact, doing so determines whether we enter the path of good fortune and benefit throughout eternity. It all depends on our resolve and determination to emerge victorious. Nichiren Daishonin writes, “The character *myo* [of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo] means to open” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 3, p. 13). Each time we face a trial in our lives, we must strive to further open and develop our state of life. By repeating that process through the years, we can experience an absolute and indestructible happiness.

The purpose of our lives, to the very last moment, is to achieve something of value. There is no life more noble than that of individuals dedicated to something they believe in and fighting for it wholeheartedly, who give their lives selflessly to their beliefs.

When you reach old age, you know in your heart if you are satisfied with your life. No one else can know this or decide it for you. The great challenge we face in our rapidly aging society is whether we can say honestly at the end our days on this earth that our lives were well spent.

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