

It's Never Too Late To Learn The Third Stage of Life

This is the fourth 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.

SASAKI: Again this year [1997], Soka University's Division of Correspondence Education held a two-week, on-campus, summer course for its correspondence students. This program is now in its 22nd year, and more than 65,000 people have participated so far, traveling from all over Japan — from Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the south — and from as many as 13 overseas countries.

IKEDA: People who study while working, people who continue to pursue learning no matter their age, are praiseworthy. As university founder, I sent a message to the opening session of this year's course in which I said: "This alliance of people dedicated to learning, transcending the limits of age, is spearheading the way toward a 21st century in which the third stage of life will be a period of boundless hope and fulfillment."

A number of years ago, I voiced my desire to enroll in a correspondence course at the university myself and study along with everyone else, but the university president refused to accept my application!

MATSUOKA: Of the approximately 4,000 correspondence students enrolled at Soka University, nearly 10 percent, or 400 students, are over 50.

IKEDA: That's wonderful.

SASAKI: In Japan, there are only 14 universities, excluding the University of the Air [which broadcasts lectures over radio and television], that offer correspondence degree courses. Soka University's program is known for its high graduation rate. A journalist who thoroughly investigated the program identified two reasons for this: the students' strong sense of purpose and a well-organized and administered study program.

IKEDA: That is most gratifying to hear. A fine tradition has been born and taken root at Soka University.

I have gone to observe some of the summer courses in years past. Not wanting to disturb the classes, however, I did so unobtrusively, just looking into the classrooms from outside.

I remember once seeing a middle-aged man sitting near the Pond of Literature during lunch break, lost in deep contemplation over some subject. It was beautiful to see someone engaged in such an earnest pursuit of learning. A little distance away, near the pond's bridge, a number of other participants lay on benches catching 40 winks — no doubt so that they would be refreshed for their next class. The whole scene was one of marvelous peace and tranquillity.

SASAKI: Yes, one often comes across scenes like that on the Soka University campus.

IKEDA: I once presented the Division of Correspondence Education with a calligraphy that read, "The light of learning." I was inspired in my choice of words by one of Soka Gakkai founding president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi's favorite mottoes: "Learning is light, and ignorance is darkness."

Everyone has the right to learn. Learning is a beautiful thing — it is light. Through learning, each of us creates a brilliant legacy of our youth, our studies and our efforts that stays with us and enriches us forever.

SASAKI: The oldest student attending this year's summer course was Masanori Kitazume, 78, from Gumma Prefecture. When asked why he enrolled in the program, he replied

without hesitation: “For me, there is no tomorrow. There is only today. So I have to do it now. All President Ikeda’s actions, too, are based on the spirit of no tomorrow.”

IKEDA: That’s so great. I hope Mr. Kitazume will continue to do his best.

Incidentally, since the summer course takes place during the full-time students’ summer holidays, some of the correspondence students stay in dormitories on campus during the two-week course, don’t they?

MATSUOKA: Yes. Takeshi Takahashi, 77, a victim of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, was one of those who stayed in the dorms. The regular students had put up a poster in the dormitory’s hallway that said, “Good Luck to All the Correspondence Course Students!” Mr. Takahashi was moved by this show of support, and he left a note on his pillow that said: “I will never forget this kindness as long as I live. I am only here for the special summer course, but I will continue to do my best.... I apologize that I can do no more to show my appreciation than to leave this memo.” His wife, Asae, 76, a retired nurse, accompanied him to Tokyo to support him in his studies during the course.

Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi have been living in prefabricated temporary housing for two years since they lost their home in the earthquake. Sharing with many others the pain and suffering of losing everything in that disaster, Mr. Takahashi decided to study for a law degree, wishing to open a free legal counseling service in his area for those in need.

SASAKI: Mr. Takahashi has been a member of the Kusunoki Chorus of the Hyogo Prefecture men’s division for 21 years — since its founding. He is also a past winner of the long-running NHK [Japan’s public TV network] amateur-talent show *I’m Proud of My Voice*.

One of our *Seikyo Shimbun* reporters who visited his home told me that Mr. Takahashi copies passages from the Goshō and from your speeches almost every day and pastes them all over the walls of his home. There’s not even room left to hang a calendar!

Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi’s home, which they generously allow to be used for their Soka Gakkai district activities, is always filled with the warmth and laughter of high-spirited members.

IKEDA: I commend Mr. Takahashi for his vigorous efforts. President Makiguchi was a firm advocate of lifelong education. He began to study English after age 50. And even in his 60s and 70s, he continued to learn with more energy and enthusiasm than most young people.

In the West, universities already play a leading role in providing adult or lifelong education. German universities have courses for the general public, and in the United Kingdom, there are educational institutes known as Universities of the Third Age — more than 30,000 of these students are past retirement age.

SASAKI: Each year Soka University receives many letters from its correspondence students expressing appreciation for the opportunity to pursue their studies later in life.

IKEDA: I’m happy that the correspondence courses have been received with such enthusiasm. From the time I began to plan for Soka University’s establishment, I wanted to include an active correspondence division. The gates to Soka University will always be open to those, irrespective of age, who have the spirit to challenge themselves and the desire to learn, including those who were unable to study in their youth for whatever reason.

MATSUOKA: I have personally seen how you always offer unstinting encouragement and words of support to those who keep advancing with the spirit to challenge themselves, especially those who forge ahead despite the daunting obstacles of fate or unfavorable circumstances.

There were several students with hearing disabilities among those participating in the special summer session this year. Some of the regular day students who are proficient in

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sign language volunteered to serve as their interpreters, staying with them throughout the course to convey the lectures and discussions to them.

This reminds me of the time you visited a school for the blind in India [1979].

IKEDA: That educational institute was attached to a fine comprehensive school in Narendrapur on the outskirts of Calcutta. The campus was shaded by huge green trees and graced with bright red bougainvillea blossoms. There were spacious playing fields, all kinds of garden plots, pens for domestic animals and dormitories. It was a wonderful facility that provided education for students from elementary school through the university level.

The principal was also blind. He showed me a manual training workshop where students were earnestly at work.

I was accompanied on that visit by K. R. Narayanan, who last month [July 1997] was elected India's new president. He was then vice chancellor of New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, and we talked together at length.

MATSUOKA: I remember that a group of students brought you a bouquet of flowers. You embraced the students and patted them affectionately on their shoulders to encourage them.

IKEDA: Yes, I remember that well. Four students came to me with the bouquet.

MATSUOKA: You said to them in a resounding voice, "Despite the challenges you may face, I hope you will never forget to strive to live greater and greater lives, day after day!" You called out those words with boundless warmth and affection. You also told them: "We all possess unlimited potential. What counts are the dreams you build for yourself and how bravely you strive to realize them. A person who is successful in this can be said to have triumphed in life!" The students seemed to absorb your words with their entire beings. Bright smiles lit their faces.

SASAKI: Soka University has developed its correspondence education to such an extent and led the Japanese educational world because it was supported by this boundless love for and commitment to the realization of each person's full potential.

I remember a quiet interlude on one of your overseas trips, when you visited Beethoven's home in Vienna [1981]. You said that although fate cruelly robbed one of the world's greatest musicians of his hearing — a fate akin to death for a musician — Beethoven was not destroyed by this loss.

IKEDA: Beethoven himself declared: "I shall seize Fate by the throat, it shall never wholly subdue me. Oh, it is good to live one's life a thousand times!" (*Beethoven: Letters, Journals and Conversations*). The life of a person who triumphs over fate is 10, a hundred, a thousand times more satisfying than one that succumbs to fate without a struggle. A triumphant individual grows more youthful and vigorous with each passing year.

SASAKI: President Ikeda, I hope you don't mind my introducing a question from one of our readers. An elderly gentleman writes: "Although I have been actively practicing Buddhism and participating in Soka Gakkai activities these many years, I feel as if I am slowly growing senile, and I am disturbed by this. What can I do?"

IKEDA: The gentleman who wrote this letter and others who share the same concern can, I think, take comfort in the fact that most people lucid enough to worry about whether they are growing senile are probably far from it. Essentially, I believe that our basic spirit as Buddhist practitioners should be to never be perturbed by anything that happens. People naturally tend to be pessimistic. I think it's important to make a conscious effort to look on the bright side.

This is a subject that I hope we can discuss in more detail in future installments. The fundamental solution lies in faith and our Buddhist practice.

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