

The Third Stage of Life Sufferings Into Treasures

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

MATSUOKA: Shinsaku Matsuura, a *Seikyo Shimbun* reporter, recently did a story on Kyokusui Yamazaki, the renowned *biwa* [Japanese lute] performer and composer who has been designated one of Japan's living national treasures, the first *biwa* performer to receive this honor. Ms. Yamazaki, 91, is a member of the Soka Gakkai arts division. Despite the unparalleled acclaim she has achieved, she continues to strive for perfection. "In art, you can never be satisfied," she says. "You have to keep learning until the day you die."

SASAKI: Ms. Yamazaki began learning the *biwa* under a very strict teacher when she was only 8. By the time she was in her teens, she had made a name for herself as a talented performer on the Chikuzen *biwa* and sparked great interest throughout Japan for this stringed instrument, which until then had been popular only in a small region of Kyushu. Her achievements as a musician are incomparable.

Ms. Yamazaki triumphed over many difficulties in the course of her long, successful career. She waged a painful battle with rheumatism, which deformed her right hand — the one she used to hold the plectrum and strike the *biwa* strings. She also devotedly nursed her husband, who suffered from a disability, becoming the sole breadwinner for her family.

IKEDA: Yes, I have heard her story. I am so happy that she is still healthy and active today.

MATSUOKA: Ms. Yamazaki's performances have been praised by knowledgeable critics as "shining like a jewel" and "a music illuminated by love." Some have even called her "a beacon for all those in the arts."

When she performed at an arts division meeting in Tokyo last year, it was so powerful that a hushed, reverent silence fell over the auditorium. Arts division members declared that her supremely accomplished singing and playing made them deeply reflect on their own art.

IKEDA: I personally will never forget the moving rendition she once gave of "The Great Hero of Kusunoki" in Kansai.

SASAKI: Ms. Yamazaki also singled out that occasion, calling it one of her most precious memories. She said that she would never forget how you came over to her afterward to express your delight and appreciation, warmly embracing her.

When she has her *biwa* in hand, she is an impressive presence. But members have said that at meetings she sits with quiet dignity toward the back and doesn't call attention to herself.

MATSUOKA: She's still very active, giving monthly lessons to her students and composing a new piece just about every year. She once said with a chuckle, "As I have aged, my voice has declined somewhat, but strangely enough, I keep coming up with ideas for one new composition after another!"

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Subject: World Tribune 03/20/98 n.3183 p.11 WT980320p11

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Keywords: Aging Dialogue Guidance Life Stage Sufferings Third Treasures Tribune World

SASAKI: One of her students said that he learns something each time he hears her perform. He said: “Though she keeps saying she’s gone as far as she can, I’m sure she’ll keep reaching new heights of creativity until the day she dies. If that weren’t the case, she wouldn’t have all the students she does. Neither her technical skill nor her commitment to her art show the slightest sign of decline.”

IKEDA: The same was true of second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda. To the very last — even on his deathbed — he urged us, his disciples, “You must never let up in your struggle against evil!” Having a great mentor is the greatest happiness one can experience.

MATSUOKA: I agree completely.

Apparently, the first thing in Ms. Yamazaki’s schedule each morning is to pencil her eyebrows. She cares for her appearance so that she’s always ready if a visitor arrives. She’s still fully involved in life. Mr. Matsuura, our reporter, said that Ms. Yamazaki’s skin was glowing and that she cut a strikingly handsome figure in a violet-colored kimono.

SASAKI: Ms. Yamazaki says that her most enjoyable hour of the day is when she shares a drink at dinner with her son and his family, with whom she now lives. She drinks two small glasses of beer, which tend to make her even more cheerful and talkative. And if there’s some of her favorite snack, fried chicken, to go along with the beer, why, she’s in seventh heaven!

IKEDA: A happy family life certainly contributes to a long life. The role that family can play is great.

MATSUOKA: Ms. Yamazaki’s granddaughter and disciple, Yoshie, says of her: “No matter how tired she is when she comes home, she never neglects to chant. She reads the newspaper every day, always looking for any piece of guidance or article by President Ikeda. I learn a great deal from her honest, simple faith.” Ms. Yamazaki proudly shares how she prays daily for the good health of you and Mrs. Ikeda and for the development of the art of *biwa* playing, including the education of young *biwa* performers.

SASAKI: How wonderful! It would be ideal if everyone could continue pursuing until the very end, like Ms. Yamazaki, self-mastery — the perfection of his or her craft or work. But it isn’t easy, is it?

MATSUOKA: Our readers have questions about that. “I find it hard to fill my days,” writes Nagamasa Ogasawara, 83, from Hiroshima. Another reader, Masashi Shimmen, 46, from Kyoto, writes, “Why is it that, as I grow older, I have a harder time finding goals to strive for?”

IKEDA: I’m sure many people have encountered these difficulties. They are emblematic of the problems we face today.

Jonathan Swift (1667– 1745), famous for *Gulliver’s Travels*, wrote in *Thoughts on Various Subjects*, “Every man desires to live long; but no man would be old.” This statement can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but I tend to see it as a pointed warning. It’s all very well to want to live long, but we shouldn’t lose sight of what it is that we seek in doing so.

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MATSUOKA: Average life expectancy in Japan is at an all-time high. We have become a society of long lives. Now, we must decide how to spend these longer lives fruitfully.

As we confront old age for a much longer period of time, we are forced to come to a new understanding of it. We need to build a society that genuinely celebrates old age and supports long, productive lives.

SASAKI: In general, people have a negative attitude toward aging. Buddhism includes aging among the four sufferings — birth, old age, sickness and death — and teaches that it is one of the fundamental causes of human suffering.

MATSUOKA: Yes. The rationale of Buddhism is to conquer the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death, which are symbolized by the story of Shakyamuni's first encounter with the four types of sufferings. That encounter motivated him to give up his royal status, leave his palace and seek enlightenment.

IKEDA: As you both have said, the goal of Buddhism is to solve the problems of birth, old age, sickness and death. But the heart of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism does not simply lie in transcending those. In his Orally Transmitted Teachings, the Daishonin states: "The four sides [of the Treasure Tower] represent the four sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. These four aspects of life adorn the tower of each of our lives" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 740). He thus elucidates a deeper understanding of those four sufferings, observing that they are transformed into treasures — treasures that add dignity and splendor to the tower of each of our lives, to the Treasure Tower of life itself.

MATSUOKA: In other words, we possess within us the mystic power to transform an apparently negative phenomenon such as growing old into something positive.

IKEDA: There is a saying that goes "To a fool, old age is a bitter winter; to a sage, it is a golden time." Everything depends upon your attitude, how you approach life.

Do you look at old age as a period of decline ending in death, or a period in which you have the opportunity to attain your goals, to bring your life to a rewarding, satisfying completion? Is old age a descending path to oblivion or an ascending path to new heights?

The same period of old age will be dramatically different for different people depending on their outlook — especially in terms of the richness and fulfillment they experience during those years.

SASAKI: In a letter we received from Kazuko Umehara, 67, a reader from Kyoto, there was the following valuable suggestion: "I try to convince everyone I know to catch themselves in daily conversation whenever they are about to use some expression that negates their potential. We need to banish any expression of defeat from our minds — for example, statements or thoughts such as: 'I can't do it.' 'I'm too old.' 'There's no point in my trying.' 'I'm past it.' 'It's too hard.'

"Instead, we should be affirming what we can still do, the great promise that we still have, telling ourselves: 'I won't give up yet.' 'I'm still young.' 'I can still do it.' 'I've still got plenty of energy and vigor.' Just by changing the way we speak, we can change our pattern of behavior toward a positive direction."

MATSUOKA: I feel more positive just listening to Mrs. Umehara's letter!

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IKEDA: The Daishonin describes the incredible difference that our fundamental approach to life can make. Discussing the secret, mystic expedient of the “Expedient Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, he says, “The term *secret* means strict, and that it [the law of causality] applies across the 3,000 realms” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 714). There is a world of difference in how we refer to old age, too — whether we view it as the “remaining years of our life” or the “third stage of our life.” *Remaining years* sounds like some useless leftovers; *the third stage*, however, emphasizes the shining potential life still holds.

The great German author and thinker Goethe writes in *West–Eastern Divan*, “Joy of existence is great, / Joy at existence is greater.” A life of purpose and commitment begins with setting goals.

I will never forget what former President Fernando Belaúnde Terry of Peru once said to me when I visited Peru....

SASAKI: That was when you were awarded the Order of the Sun of Peru in the Grade of Grand Cross [March 1984], wasn’t it?

IKEDA: Yes. President Belaúnde was then 71. He had been elected in the first democratic vote after Peru was restored to civilian rule, and he was deeply loved by the Peruvians. “This is the last term I will serve as president,” he said. “After that, I intend to devote my life to my field of specialty, architecture — to continue my studies and to contribute to my nation and humanity.”

President Belaúnde stated firmly: “Living out my remaining years in idle retirement is not for me. Because I am determined to live this precious life even more fully, I don’t give the slightest thought to retirement.”

I hear that Mr. Belaúnde is still healthy and active today.

MATSUOKA: SGI of Peru General Director Carlos K. Shima said that just recently Mr. Belaúnde viewed one of your photo anthologies and said: “I feel as if I am traveling the world with President Ikeda. I will never forget our meeting.”

SASAKI: You also visited Peru more than two decades ago, I remember [March 1974]. You then proposed an educational exchange program with the oldest university in Latin America, the National University of San Marcos.

I can still see you standing in the hot sun, encouraging local SGI members working hard in their local communities. Because of your hectic schedule and the sweltering heat, you fell ill. The university rector, Dr. Juan de Dios Guevara Romero, paid a visit to your lodging to inquire after your health, as I recall. Over the years, you have contributed invaluable to friendly exchange between Peru and Japan.

MATSUOKA: Going back to what President Belaúnde said about not wanting an idle retirement but desiring to devote his entire life to serving humanity, I think that establishing a clear goal and then devoting your life to its realization is the best way to build a society in which long lives are productive, in which they contribute to the happiness of oneself and others alike.

IKEDA: Founding Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi discussed establishing a purpose in life:

Unless, from the very start, one sets the highest goal for one’s life — no matter how lofty and hard to realize it may seem — one’s life will be filled with the anxiety that comes

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from searching futilely in the dark. And it will weave capriciously in one direction, then another, with no rhyme or reason.

The Lotus Sutra also says, “Our wish is that in future ages / we may use our long lives to save sentient beings” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 239). This is a vow to live long in order to have more time to help other living beings.

The sweetness of a life well lived can only be savored when your life has a great purpose. That purpose, that goal, is your own. There is no need to compare yourself to others. It is important to choose your own goal and to move toward achieving it in your own way.

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