

The Third Stage of Life Unclouded Eyes, Undistorted Vision

This is the sixth 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: We agreed to discuss today the life of Mary H. Cornwall Legh, an Englishwoman who spent many years in Japan. There is a monument to Ms. Legh in a park near the Soka Gakkai's Many Treasures Center in the town of Kusatsu in Gumma Prefecture. And her grave is also nearby. Local members have told me that she is still deeply admired and respected by the people of Gumma.

SASAKI: She devoted her life to the care and treatment of people suffering from Hansen's disease, or leprosy.

IKEDA: Yes. Mary Cornwall Legh was born into the British nobility, grew up on a large, wooded estate, and studied at a university, receiving the highest education possible for a woman of her time. Then she abandoned her life of comfort to work as a Christian missionary in Japan.

SASAKI: Ms. Legh was born in 1857 in Canterbury, England. When she was young, she traveled the world with her mother. After visiting North America and seeing Niagara Falls and many other sights, she came to Japan, where she was deeply impressed by the country's scenic beauty.

IKEDA: After her mother's death, Ms. Legh in 1908 returned alone to Japan to begin her missionary work at age 51. At 59, she moved to the Yunosawa area of Kusatsu in Gumma to devote her life to the victims of Hansen's disease who had come to live there from throughout Japan.

MATSUOKA: The Yunosawa hot springs, located on the lower reaches of the Yukawa river in Kusatsu, became a kind of settlement for sufferers of the debilitating disease. They came seeking the beneficial, medicinal effects of the water there, which had a high sulfur content.

SASAKI: In those days in Japan, Hansen's disease was thought not only to be incurable but hereditary. [It carried such a great social stigma that families of sufferers would usually try to conceal the presence of the illness.] Many victims came to live in this isolated community of fellow sufferers in Yunosawa [either voluntarily or because they had been cast out and had nowhere else to go]. Their lives were filled with great material hardship and emotional pain.

IKEDA: Ms. Legh was a dedicated Christian, and she established medical and educational facilities for Hansen's disease patients and their children, giving her life to bring them security. She built several nursing and residential homes for patients.

Eventually, she also built a clinic for them, where they could receive free medical treatment by a qualified doctor. She paid for all these things herself, using her enormous personal wealth.

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Subject: World Tribune 06/19/98 n.3196 p.1 WT980619p01
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Keywords: Aging Cornwall Eyes Guidance Humanitarians Legh Life Mary News People Stage Third Tribune
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And what is really remarkable is that she began this great labor in the latter part of her life.

Ms. Legh lived modestly. When her patients witnessed her humble, selfless way of life, they felt a surge of pride in enduring poverty.

SASAKI: During her weekly visits to give Bible instruction in Shimoma, some distance away from Yunosawa, Ms. Legh stayed overnight in a tiny, makeshift hut without amenities of any kind. She was also known to be kind not only to people but to animals.

IKEDA: In winter, she wore the same straw boots as the locals to walk through the deep snows and visit the bedsides of the sick. Later, when rubber boots became available, she said she was happier about the invention of rubber boots than the light bulb. And she even used to wear those boots on her visits to Tokyo.

MATSUOKA: When other Westerners saw her poor attire and the humble circumstances in which she lived, they would exclaim that she lived like a beggar.

IKEDA: Though she had been born and bred in the British upper classes, she was prepared to do anything to serve the people. She was an admirable person. She could do what she did because of her unselfish spirit.

I think we can safely say that, at least in one respect, such selflessness has contributed to the development of Christianity as a world religion. Similarly, it is precisely because SGI members have worked so hard for the betterment of society and the welfare of humanity, not seeking personal glory or gain nor abusing our organization, that the SGI has become a world presence, too.

MATSUOKA: Taminosuke Nuki, who shared Ms. Legh's labors, wrote a book about her titled *The Life and Work of Mary Cornwall Legh*.

IKEDA: Yes. He wrote: "Anyone observing the life of Madame Legh could see that it transcended all logic and calculation. She had no hunger for worldly fame or fortune. She cared only for befriending, with justice and compassion, the sick whom the world had abandoned. She sacrificed herself. She labored endlessly. She spared no effort. She gave all her wealth to their encouragement and comfort." How admirable!

SASAKI: Inspired by Ms. Legh, more than 900 people converted to Christianity. She personally washed and prepared for burial some 300 of her converts — all sufferers of Hansen's disease — when they died.

IKEDA: She was loved by all. They called her Mom. For her 77th birthday, they made an album for her with that title. They dedicated it with profound gratitude to "She who mothered us all, who had mothers once but lost them." It included the poems:

*Though it is sad indeed
To be ill
But how fortunate we are
To be blessed with
Such a mother.
Though she wears*

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*Only rough garments
Our mother's
Face shines
With love.*

How moving these are!

SASAKI: After her 77th birthday, Ms. Legh, who had been untiring until then, began to show signs of deteriorating health. And eventually, she moved to Akashi in Hyogo Prefecture to convalesce. She died at 84 in 1941, never once forgetting her beloved “family” in Kusatsu.

At her request, her ashes were interred in the ossuary of the church at Kusatsu, along with those of many of her patients.

MATSUOKA: The Pacific War had officially begun just 10 days before her death, and Japan and the United Kingdom had already severed diplomatic relations. The wartime slogan “The Americans and British Are Devils and Beasts” was on everyone’s lips.

SASAKI: But the Japanese Minister of Health and Welfare sent a representative on his behalf to attend her funeral. The next year, when the missionary’s ashes were returned to Kusatsu and a ceremony conducted, a representative of the town’s mayor as well as the chief of police and other local officials attended.

IKEDA: A memorial park was built on a hill overlooking Yunosawa, and a monument to Ms. Legh’s life erected on it, indicating just how well-respected and beloved she was, regardless of her nationality. Ms. Legh had a wonderful life, I am certain. She found a noble cause to devote herself to, took it up gladly and bravely and gave everything to fulfill her chosen vocation.

In Buddhism, a person’s true greatness lies in his or her behavior, in how he or she has lived life. It is important to develop a way of looking at the world and at people with unclouded eyes, with undistorted vision, transcending doctrine and orthodoxy.

The ultimate measure of faith is found in the spirit to devote one’s life, far transcending any quest for personal merit. This spirit of devotion is true selflessness. It is to cast aside selfish desires. It is complete dedication to the Law and to humanity. The Soka Gakkai is what it is today precisely because its members have always acted with such a spirit, with such total commitment.

I will never forget those who have worked so hard alongside me to support the Soka Gakkai through the years. I am sure that Nichiren Daishonin also praises their tremendous efforts. Because they have worked so hard, I want all members from those early years to stride vigorously through their third stage of life and bring their lives to wonderful completions.

MATSUOKA: You composed a poem to commemorate your 50th year of practicing faith:

*For 50 years
I have advanced with a spirit
Of selfless devotion
At last fulfilling
The vow I made for this lifetime*

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Reading it, I was struck anew how important that spirit is.

IKEDA: Just the other day [Aug. 25, 1997], I met with Li Chengxian, widow of the late Chang Shuhong, the director of the Dunhuang Relics Research Institute and custodian of the treasures of Dunhuang. Madame Li and her husband pledged together to devote their lives to preserving, studying, promoting and passing on to the next generation the treasures of Dunhuang. They never gave up, in spite of the loneliness of the desert, the impoverished conditions in which they lived, the scorn of thoughtless people, and persecution by the authorities.

Madame Li has spent her life in selfless service to the art of Dunhuang by her own choice. Even today, the fires of creativity burn undiminished within her. She has recently embarked on a project to create new caves at Dunhuang for contemporary wall paintings. Her grand vision is to invite artists from around the world to participate. She wants to build a modern-day version of the Mogao Caves and the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas in these coming years spanning the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. At her advanced age, she still has glorious plans. I was moved talking with her.

SASAKI: I know many may consider it rude to mention a woman's age, but Madame Li is 72. She is still healthy and active. In the August meeting, she described her excitement at meeting you for the first time in Beijing 17 years ago, saying that she could still see that moment as clear as day.

IKEDA: Yes, I met Madame Li and Chang Shuhong in April 1980 on my fifth visit to China. Sun Pinghua, who was then president of the China–Japan Friendship Association, introduced me to them. On that trip, Deng Yingchao, the widow of the late Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, invited me to her home in Zhongnanhai, Beijing. I also met with many of China's new leaders and gave a commemorative lecture at Beijing University on receiving an honorary doctorate from that institution.

MATSUOKA: I remember Sun Pinghua, who understood your busy schedule, saying to you in his fluent Japanese: "There is someone I really think you should meet. He is a wonderful person. I know how busy you are, but please make just a little time. You will not regret it." He was referring to Chang Shuhong.

IKEDA: Chang Shuhong and Madame Li came to see me at the Beijing Hotel. The day before, the 77-year-old Mr. Chang had just returned from what was then West Germany. We had a pleasant meeting and conversation that lasted two-and-a-half hours, talking about the Silk Road and Dunhuang to our hearts' content. I was deeply struck by his passion for and commitment to Dunhuang, which earned him the nickname Desert Freak.

MATSUOKA: Mr. Chang's greeting upon first meeting you was memorable: "This morning I heard on the radio that Madame Deng Yingchao met with you yesterday. I have heard your name many times in the past. I am so happy to meet you today in person!"

SASAKI: Now, 17 years after that first meeting, Madame Li relates, "I have met Mr. and Mrs. Ikeda many times over the years in China and Japan, and each time our friendship deepens."

IKEDA: In our published dialogue [available only in Japanese and Chinese to date], Mr.

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Chang related his fateful encounter with the art of Dunhuang in a book of photographic plates. He was then a student in Paris, and, on learning of the existence of such wonderful paintings in his homeland, he returned to devote his life to preserving them for all humanity.

In the years that followed, he met with much hardship and persecution. But still, in his last years, he said that he knew he had not been mistaken in choosing the life he did. He never regretted it, he declared. This is the way we ought to live.

SASAKI: A life dedicated to kosen-rufu is like that, isn't it?

IKEDA: Yes. When I asked Mr. Chang what profession he would choose if he were to be reborn as a human being, he replied, "If I really could be reborn human, I would once more choose to be Chang Shuhong and finish the work I have started."

In terms of our mission as Bodhisattvas of the Earth, we who embrace the Mystic Law dedicate our lives to an eternal mission that exists across the three existences — our mission to continue the great undertaking of kosen-rufu.

SASAKI: The beautiful ties of friendship between you and this Chinese couple reminds me of the magnificent oil painting of Chomolungma, or Mount Everest, that they painted together and presented to you a few years ago. This masterpiece now adorns the entrance hall of the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall.

MATSUOKA: Yes. I am sure it is the result of a warm friendship that grew from your "making a little time" on your 1980 visit to China.

IKEDA: Each of our lives is like a canvas. The question is what kind of picture do we paint there?

We don't have to be celebrities or geniuses. What's important is to fill our canvas in our own style and to our satisfaction, depicting the brilliant drama of a life devoted to our individual mission. With all our heart and being. Up to the last moment.

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