

## **The Third Stage of Life You Are Your Own Judge**

*Participants in this discussion are SGI President Ikeda, Seikyo Shimbun General Editorial Bureau Senior Director Osamu Matsuoka and Vice Director Katsusuke Sasaki.*

**MATSUOKA:** Congratulations on the special commendation you received from the World Federation of U.N. Associations, “in recognition of invaluable services rendered in the support of the United Nations and promotion of world peace.” And congratulations on the Peace Ambassador award bestowed on you by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation earlier this month. It is a tribute to your commitment to the spirit of second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda’s declaration for the abolition of nuclear weapons, issued 40 years ago [September 1957] and your tireless work to promote peace activities and cultural and educational exchange.

**SASAKI:** You have initiated many different projects to support the United Nations, such as sponsoring exhibitions on themes like the threat of nuclear weapons and the importance of human rights and conducting refugee relief fund-raising campaigns. In June 1996, you attended the opening of the exhibition “Nuclear Arms: Threat to Our World” in Costa Rica, a nation so dedicated to peace that it has done away with its military forces altogether.

You first visited the U.N. Headquarters in New York 23 years ago, in January 1975. I remember a cold wind was blowing from the East River. You had a meeting with the secretary-general and presented him with a petition circulated by the youth division for the elimination of nuclear weapons. It had 10 million signatures. You also conveyed your wish to make broad-ranging efforts to arouse international support for the United Nations.

**MATSUOKA:** Then, after your U.N. visit, you went to Guam.

**IKEDA:** Yes. We flew from New York and, after stops in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, went on to Guam. During World War II, the beautiful green island of Guam was turned into a bloody battleground. Many people lost their lives. I wanted to begin a worldwide movement for peace from there.

Chicago, buffeted by the winds over the Great Lakes, was freezing — minus 4! Tropical Guam was a balmy 86. That’s a difference of 90 degrees. My trip lasted about three weeks.

**SASAKI:** In the midst of this busy itinerary, you founded the SGI on Guam [Jan. 26, 1975]. Soka Gakkai members from 51 nations gathered for the event. Before the meeting, each of them signed the attendance book. At the entrance to the hall, you were asked to sign the opening page. In the nationality column, you wrote “World.” When the members, many wearing their respective national dress, heard this through their interpreters, they broke out in enthusiastic cheers.

**MATSUOKA:** You have been a true citizen of the world, devoting mighty efforts to peace and activities to support the aims of the United Nations.

**IKEDA:** We must always do what we say we will. We must always keep our promises. This is the only proper way for a person to behave.

Mr. Toda used to say: “Once you lose people’s trust, it’s all over. You can talk about

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integrity all you want, but unless your actions match your words, it's useless." These are the words of a great man.

I have worked to achieve my goals one step at a time. I have never been interested in reward or recognition. This is my greatest pride and treasure.

A life must be judged by what the person has achieved in total. When you stride with vigorous, determined steps along the path you have chosen, you will always triumph in the end. Such a life is noble. It doesn't matter how others judge you. When all is said and done, you are your own judge.

**MATSUOKA:** Yes, I agree. Speaking of the final period of life, there is one issue that many people have to face at that time: nursing care. I want to share a heartwarming story of one family's experience with this problem. Kazuko Morimoto, a women's division leader of the Shin'etsu region [Niigata and Nagano prefectures], told me this story of the Kondo family in Niigata Prefecture.

Mrs. Morimoto is very familiar with what the elderly face because, as she reported, elderly members are in the majority in the largely rural Shin'etsu region. Many younger people have moved away to the big cities. Often as much as 90 percent of discussion meeting attendance is elderly members of the Many Treasures Group.

**IKEDA:** I know Mrs. Morimoto from when she was in the young women's division. She's a hard worker. I remember her being very interested in Yoshida Shoin, a 19th-century thinker and reformer who established an innovative private school. When she was a student with long hair and jeans, she visited all the sites around Japan linked to Shoin. She read everything about him. She's a very active person. I'm sure that she's still rushing busily about as she always has, this time on the vast stage of the Shin'etsu region.

**SASAKI:** A short distance from where Mrs. Morimoto lives is a mountain called Obasuteyama, which is associated with the legend of abandoning old women that appears in ancient collections of Japanese folk tales such as *Tales of Yamato* and *Tales of a Time That Is Now Past*. The general scenario of this legend goes something like this: There is a man who loses his parents when young and is raised by his aunt. After he marries, his wife persuades him to get rid of his aunt, and he carries her on his back up to the top of the mountain, abandoning her there.

But as he gazes at the bright moon on the way down the mountain, he can no longer bear what he has done. The next morning, he returns for his aunt and takes her back home. This legend also formed the basis for the prize-winning novel *The Oak Mountain Song* by Shichiro Fukazawa.

**IKEDA:** The Daishonin's writings mention the country Kirokoku, or "The Country Where Old People Were Abandoned" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1514). It is described in Buddhist scripture as a place where the elderly were discarded and left to die to reduce the number of mouths to feed.

Then one day the country was faced with a terrible crisis, only to be saved by the wisdom of one elderly man whose son had hidden him away, refusing to follow custom. The king thereupon changed the laws to ensure that the elderly would be treated with reverence.

**MATSUOKA:** Going back to the Kondo family, whom I mentioned earlier, one of our *Seikyo Shimbun* reporters went to visit them. Five family members are currently living

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together: Sachiko Kondo, the zone women's division general leader; her husband, a joint prefecture vice general leader; one of their two sons; and Mr. Kondo's father and mother. The Kondos have another son who is in Tokyo studying at Soka University.

**SASAKI:** Mrs. Kondo's mother-in-law, Naka, has been bedridden for five years, and she is experiencing symptoms of senility. Our reporter said that Naka's room was kept bright, cheery and tidy, and that Naka had the most beautiful face.

**MATSUOKA:** Mrs. Kondo's father-in-law, Kanoe, is 89 and an indispensable part of the family. He remains healthy and active and helps Naka, one year younger, with eating and going to the bathroom. They are a very close couple.

At night when he goes to sleep, Kanoe takes his wife's hand and repeats three times, "Tonight again, let us hold hands as husband and wife and sleep peacefully, with pleasant dreams." Then he lies down in his bed beside hers.

**SASAKI:** They were both elementary school teachers, and Kanoe is an accomplished pianist. He still plays every day, from classical works such as "For Elise" to children's songs and popular music. He will often sing along as he does so. Naka rests in the next room with a happy expression on her face, as if she were glad to hear her husband playing the familiar old songs again.

**IKEDA:** What a beautiful scene. Kanoe and Naka are certainly enjoying the most wonderful end to what seems to have been a fine life together.

Charles Chaplin, the great comedian of the silent screen who lived to 88, was once asked in his later years what he thought his greatest work was. He replied, "The work I am about to create, of course."

Such a positive attitude toward life stimulates the brain cells and produces new energy and vitality, no matter what your age. People who are naturally optimistic, who are forward-looking, are truly happy. I'm sure many such people also enjoy the warm support of family members.

**MATSUOKA:** Yes. Kanoe sits by Naka's bedside and talks to her: "You have worked so hard for your family all these years, so please don't worry about accepting help now. Let's live to 100 together!"

**IKEDA:** It's remarkable for an 89-year-old man to nurse his wife. A Buddhist scripture says that the full span of human life is 120 years. The determination to live more than 100 years must certainly have an invigorating, rejuvenating influence.

**SASAKI:** When our reporter inquired into his secret for a long, healthy life, Kanoe offered the following three poems:

*The fine friends I have made  
Are the rainbow  
Stretching across my later years*

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*The best fashion  
Is to wear old age  
With grace and elegance*

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*Pleasant  
Happy talk  
That rolls off the tongue*

**MATSUOKA:** One of Sachiko Kondo’s sons has Down’s syndrome, and she once collapsed from the hard work and stress of caring for him. She says that the sight of her in-laws supporting each other with such love and kindness helped her get back on her feet. She also says that she can keep going because Naka says to her from time to time, “Thanks, Mom.”

**SASAKI:** When his mother became ill and required nursing care, Sachiko’s husband also humbly asked for her help and support, explaining that he wanted to make his mother’s remaining days happy ones. He acknowledged the extra burden it would place on his wife and asked for her understanding and cooperation. That really helped Sachiko decide to do her best, too — even in difficult circumstances.

**MATSUOKA:** They avail themselves of the city’s welfare services, for example, using a day service to help Naka with her weekly bath. They also use a short-stay-care service once a month, which gives them a few days’ break from nursing duties. They rent Naka’s wheelchair and special bed from the city. Now Sachiko’s sister, who lives nearby, also helps when she can. At last, they have created a manageable routine.

**IKEDA:** Like it or not, the way in which we have lived — for instance, whether we have been kind to others and helped them — is revealed in unvarnished form when we grow old and frail and senility overtakes us. This is another reason why it is so important for couples to forge bonds of love and trust while they are both still healthy and strong.

Though they certainly have struggled, the Kondos are in many ways fortunate. In most cases, there are not enough hospitals or other care facilities available, and with the tendency toward smaller families, it is more difficult to care for the elderly within the family.

**SASAKI:** Some people become utterly exhausted by nursing elderly family members. With no end to the task in sight, they wear themselves out completely, mentally and physically, even sacrificing their family and professional lives.

**IKEDA:** Only those who have gone through it themselves can really grasp how heavy the burden can be. It’s important for us to care for the caregivers as well and offer them our support. If there is a family in your neighborhood facing this situation, I hope you will help them out and encourage them.

A scholar who has had personal experience with such nursing has suggested that we have reached the point where we must evolve from family care for the elderly to care provided by a network of outside caregivers, who have a genuine commitment to provide quality nursing services and support. I think that is correct.

Society’s emphasis in this respect is changing from blood relations to “care relations.” I think this will be an important theme in coming years.

I want to discuss this topic at greater length in the future, but I believe that this is precisely the kind of caring network or family that the Soka Gakkai and the SGI have created in communities in Japan and around the world.

**MATSUOKA:** Speaking of caring for others, this is a theme passionately advocated by Dr. Jutta Unkart-Seifert, undersecretary of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts

and Sports, with whom you enjoy a close friendship. She performed at the Kanagawa World Youth Music Festival [Sept. 14, 1997]. Dr. Unkart-Seifert is utterly dedicated to working for others. She is a model and inspiration for all in their third stage of life.

**IKEDA:** She is an opera singer, a government official, a doctor of philosophy and a homemaker. She lives her life to the fullest. Both her parents were blind, and her father was a recital singer. Dr. Unkart-Seifert chose not to follow her father's footsteps but went to Vienna University, where she received her doctorate before entering government service.

Then, when her father died, she decided that she wanted to sing again as she had as a child with her father. While juggling her family and professional duties, she studied voice to make up for the 10 years she had not sung.

She says, quite simply and matter-of-factly, that she worked five times harder than most people. "Life is too short," she has said. "We must leave something behind. I want to serve those who need me. Today or tomorrow may be the last day of my life. That is why I want to leave something eternal behind."

Serving those who need us — this is the spirit of the Soka Gakkai since its founding.

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