

## **The Third Stage of Life Improving the Quality of Our Lives**

*It's not enough to live long, SGI President Ikeda says in this dialogue on the third stage of life. 'The important thing is that we live each day without regret, moving forward in our work for kosen-rufu; and that we continue to cherish in our hearts a shining purpose and reason for living, whatever our age,' he says.*

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

**SASAKI:** Dr. Yoshihiko Ojiri, chief secretary of the Soka Gakkai's science and academic division in Okinawa Prefecture, has offered us some interesting information from the perspective of the health sciences about the longevity of the inhabitants of Okinawa. He is an instructor with the Faculty of Medicine of the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa, and he teaches a course in elementary public health. Toward the end of 1996, the university embarked on an extensive study into the relationship between longevity and Okinawa's climate and regional characteristics. Dr. Ojiri is one of the researchers involved in that project.

**MATSUOKA:** It is widely accepted that blood vessel blockages in the brain are a major cause of senility, and that bone fractures arising from osteoporosis cause many elderly people to become bedridden. How, then, can we prevent blood vessel damage and the thinning of bone mass?

Dr. Ojiri has been studying what effect exercise patterns have on cholesterol levels and bone density and collating scientific data to demonstrate the importance of exercise. His next step is to make a statistical comparison between the Okinawa data collected and that from other prefectures.

**IKEDA:** That's a meaningful field of research. Wisdom is the secret to good health. Wisdom allows us to ensure our well-being. We need to be aware of how to prevent illness before it occurs and how to preserve our health so that we can go about our activities with zest and energy. We mustn't simply succumb passively to old age; instead, we should engage it head on positively and actively. The field of health science offers us a special type of wisdom that teaches us how to accomplish that. Today, many universities around the world have made this field a separate department of specialization. Japan, however, lags behind these moves.

**SASAKI:** Dr. Ojiri offers two important factors in achieving long life: 1) dealing successfully with stress, and 2) physical activity. He points out that since there is no way to avoid stress in life, it is important to deal with it successfully and learn to prevent it from accumulating.

### **Master Your Mind**

**IKEDA:** Recently [Sept. 20, 1997], I met with Dr. Martin Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and president-elect of the American

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Psychological Association. Dr. Seligman said that people who focus only on themselves tend to fall victim to pessimism easily.

The death of a loved one, divorce, business failure — these are among life's most stressful events. The older you are, the more devastating these events can be. You feel as if you are all alone in pitch darkness, suffering and in pain. There are feelings of isolation and sorrow — which is perfectly natural since we're only human.

Nevertheless, or rather precisely because of this, it's important that we look deep into our hearts and become painters, artists — that we strive actively to repaint our minds in the colors of hope. As long as we remain preoccupied with our own troubles, as long as we allow ourselves to blindly follow the impulsive dictates of our minds, our sufferings will continue. We must each become the master of our mind, not let it be our master, and consciously redirect our thoughts in a positive and pleasant direction and help others around us do the same.

**MATSUOKA:** That is the secret to dealing with stress, isn't it? Dr. Ojiri has remarked that the Soka Gakkai embodies a system whereby members can discuss their problems with others, a sort of counseling system that has evolved naturally within Soka Gakkai activities. There are many leaders, and a member can talk to them about his or her problems. If one leader's advice doesn't seem helpful, there's always another leader to turn to, and another, until the member is satisfied.

**IKEDA:** Sometimes seeking advice from many leaders may not be necessary. Josei Toda, the Soka Gakkai's second president encouraged each member to find a trusted senior in faith with whom they could feel free to discuss anything.

Essentially, our own mind or thinking holds the key to dealing successfully with problems that cause anxiety or stress. So in that respect here, too, our heart is what matters most.

**SASAKI:** With regard to the second factor for a long life, physical activity, I think we can learn a great deal by looking at the case of Ogimi, a village on Okinawa's main island that prides itself in the longevity of its residents. One section of Ogimi, known as Kijoka, produces the famous abaca (banana plant cloth) of Okinawa, and its residents are notably long-lived.

The folk craft of weaving Okinawan abaca, incidentally, has been designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Japan.

**MATSUOKA:** The University of the Ryukyus team, including Dr. Ojiri, conducted a detailed survey of the daily routines of the elderly residents of this area. Most of them, they found, continued to spin abaca thread well after age 90. This physical activity kept their hands and bodies nimble and supple. At the same time, the elderly residents had a real sense of contributing to the community, because they were helping produce this famous local product. This seemed to be related to their longevity.

**IKEDA:** Speaking of abaca, two years ago when I was at the Okinawa Training Center, some elderly members — whom I believe were from Kijoka — showed me how the cloth was woven. It was so interesting that I saw the demonstration twice.

**MATSUOKA:** Yes, you met Kazu Taira, 86, Miki Nakada, 82, and Yasu Maeda, 80. After shaking your hand on that occasion, one of them remarked with emotion how she would

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never forget your gentle touch or Mrs. Ikeda's kind smile as she wished them continued good health.

**SASAKI:** When we asked them the secret of their longevity, they offered all sorts of reasons. One said it was Okinawa's great weather and fresh air; another declared it was eating plenty of vegetables; another chimed in that she ate a lot of pork, and she just loved it. The third suggested that it was working all the time, trying to make ends meet.

### **Light a Lantern for Others**

**IKEDA:** It is often pointed out that Okinawa retains the positive neighborly values of a horizontal, egalitarian society. For example, in Ogimi Village, passersby will turn on their neighbors' lights for them when it gets dark. No one wants to return home to a dark house, the thinking goes, so they kindly turn the lights on so that the occupants can return to a bright house. Most people in the village never lock their doors. There are no thefts or other crimes. It's a place where people can live in peace and security.

In the *Gosho* we find the passage, "If you light a lantern for another, it will also brighten your own way" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1598). In an aging society, the spirit of lighting a lantern for others is very important. In the end, it means brightening your own way as well.

**MATSUOKA:** In an environment such as Ogimi, the solitary death of an elderly person living alone, which happens in so many big cities, is unthinkable, isn't it?

**SASAKI:** People in Ogimi share the extra vegetables they grow — the tomatoes, cucumbers and balsam pears that they pick — with their neighbors. When they have extra, they just leave them on their neighbors' doorsteps.

**IKEDA:** Local cooperation and mutual assistance are carried out in an extremely natural way, without the formality or bureaucracy we see in other parts of Japan. I think that's wonderful. The Okinawan spirit of mutual aid is famous. Labor-intensive activities such as sugar-cane harvesting are carried out collectively, every family taking turns helping the others. This same spirit of sharing no doubt is what sustains Okinawans' longevity.

**MATSUOKA:** The production of abaca is another example of sharing. There are some 30 steps in the process of making the cloth. First, the raw material for the cloth, abaca plants, which grow to about six feet in height, are chopped down; then they are boiled, washed and hazed with bamboo pincers to comb out the fibers. Next, they are dried, separated into threads and boiled again in a big pot. Then they are wrung out and dyed, and still the list goes on. There are an unbelievable number of steps to the process, many requiring considerable physical strength. Finely honed skill and craftsmanship are also needed to produce the cloth.

**SASAKI:** The women of the village divide up the work based on their levels of expertise, making it a joint production. That shared work is fun, they say, and also gives them a sense of purpose and fulfillment. They have a job at which they can stay active throughout their lives.

**IKEDA:** I have heard that Kazu Taira is a member of the Abaca Cloth Preservation Society

and an expert weaver. She made a strong impression on me. Her open and frank personality was revealed in the laugh lines that adorned her face; I'm sure that smile helped her sail through whatever troubles she may have encountered in her long life.

**SASAKI:** Kazu was raised by her widowed mother, who half-forced her to learn spinning as a craft by which she could support herself. She says she loathed spinning when she was young and went to work instead at a textile plant outside Okinawa just to get away from it. But now she says: "I am grateful to my mother for teaching me to work with my hands. Yes, now that I'm 80, I am finally truly grateful to her."

Kazu and her two friends are known to declare cheerfully: "We're busy. We've got Gakkai activities. We have no time to waste." The local Soka Gakkai chapter women's division leader, Kimiko Nikawadori, remarked that the three women often declare they've had "an idle day" if they take even an hour or two out of their work day to attend to something else. The younger people can't keep up with them, she says with admiration.

**IKEDA:** There is an expression that symbolizes the Okinawan spirit, "*Nuchi du takara*," or "Life is a treasure." In the *Gosho* we also find the passage, "Life itself is the most precious of all treasures" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 267). Both reveal a profound philosophy of the innate sanctity of life.

The Okinawan dialect contains no words to express pity toward others in a patronizing or condescending way. Instead, Okinawans say "*chimugurisa*," which means "my heart aches." This, of course, is the same as the Gakkai spirit of sharing or feeling others' sufferings as our own.

Do you know the Okinawan expression "*ichariba chode*"?

**SASAKI:** It means "All whom we meet are our brothers," doesn't it?

**IKEDA:** Yes. This is another expression of the wisdom of an egalitarian society. Buddhism teaches us that "All living beings are indebted to one another, so pray for the attainment of Buddhahood for all" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1527). A place where people are valued, where human relations are treasured, has all the vital ingredients for a society in which people live long and fulfilled lives.

In Okinawa, it's customary for relatives and neighbors to celebrate a person's longevity. One of the most interesting celebrations is that for reaching one's 97th year (which begins with our 96th birthday). It's called *kajimaya*, which means "pinwheel." In this celebration, the birthday person rides through the streets of town in an open vehicle. He or she holds a pinwheel, as do all the people who line the streets. In one's 97th year, it is said that one becomes young at heart again, and playing with a pinwheel symbolizes that childlike innocence. Whatever the true origins of this celebration may be, the community's respect and celebration also become important motivations for people to live long.

**SASAKI:** Soka Gakkai Vice President Kunihiro Mitsumori of Okinawa has said that in the capital, Naha, and other urbanized areas of the prefecture, these wonderful old traditions are on the wane. As a result, many people have great hopes that the Soka Gakkai's network of friendship and sense of community — created through its regular local gatherings and monthly discussion meetings — will spread further throughout these areas, where they feel it will help preserve the Okinawan spirit.

**IKEDA:** In the early years of our activities on Okinawa, the strong egalitarian ties that

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bound people in the community posed a great hurdle to our propagation activities. It was difficult for an individual to be the first in his or her family to join the Soka Gakkai. But as we continued to emphasize the organization's goals and to demonstrate solid actual proof of faith in everyday life, the circle of understanding steadily expanded throughout Okinawan society.

I think you could call it a case of reaching a critical point. Once we reached that point, understanding toward the Daishonin's Buddhism rapidly spread and deepened. That is also due to the Okinawan character, I think.

**MATSUOKA:** Mr. Mitsumori's mother is 91, but still very hale and hearty. She was born on Taketomijima (one of the islands that comprise Okinawa Prefecture), and she was the first in her extended family to join the Soka Gakkai. Mr. Mitsumori said that his mother's decision upset her family in the beginning, but when they saw the positive changes she underwent as a result of challenging her human revolution, they quickly joined the Gakkai, too — a reflection of just how strong the family ties were. Today, every member of that extended family practices the Daishonin's Buddhism.

## **Improve the Quality of Life**

**IKEDA:** There is a difference between simply living a long life and living a rich and rewarding life. What's important is how much we can improve the quality of our lives during our stay here on Earth — however long it may be. For example, a life can be fulfilled and productive even if it is short by time's measure. Quality is the true value, not quantity.

I recently met with Dr. Ved Prakash Nanda, the associate provost of the University of Denver [Sept. 11, 1997]. Dr. Nanda is a world-renowned scholar of international law and a good friend. Though he is struggling with illness himself, he expressed concern for my health. "I am praying with all my heart that you will live to over 100," he told me. He also shared a famous Indian saying: "One must live 1,000 years. Live 1,000 years as if each year has 10,000 days."

The important thing is that we live each day without regret, moving forward in our work for kosen-rufu; and that we continue to cherish in our hearts a shining purpose and reason for living, whatever our age. Leading each day in this way is the key to a life of profound satisfaction and fulfillment.

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