

The Third Stage of Life Guaranteed To Open New Opportunities

SGI President and Mrs. Ikeda remember many of their struggles in traveling overseas for the organization. They faced many apparent dead-ends, like the time in 1974 when they couldn't get visas to enter Brazil, but opened new opportunities every time through their faith.

Participants in this installment are SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, Mrs. Kaneko Ikeda, Seikyo Shimbun General Editorial Bureau Senior Director Osamu Matsuoka and Vice Director Katsusuke Sasaki.

MATSUOKA: With the increased number of President Ikeda's trips overseas, I'm sure that the demands placed upon you have grown, Mrs. Ikeda. We'd be happy if you could share with us what some of those travels have been like.

K. IKEDA: Certainly. As you know, in many countries, it is customary for a husband and wife to participate in social occasions as a couple. When our children were small, of course, I couldn't travel, but now I usually go along.

D. IKEDA: She often jokes that she's the garnish accompanying the main dish, but she's always a great help. When I meet with various dignitaries, they almost always have their spouses with them.

Over the years, in addition to attending SGI events and encouraging members, my meetings and dialogues with non-members have also increased significantly. That is why my wife started accompanying me.

The Secret of Leadership

K. IKEDA: In the early years, we had few headquarters staff traveling with us, and I took care of everything myself. We'd arrive at our hotel, and the first thing I'd do was unpack. My next task was to get him to rest.

Once I'd made sure he was relaxed, I'd cook some rice and prepare some simple food in the bathroom. That was my role, and it suited me perfectly.

SASAKI: As a *Seikyo Shimbun* reporter, I have accompanied you and President Ikeda on overseas trips, and I've always found your presence invaluable, Mrs. Ikeda. You contribute such warmth and ease to the atmosphere.

I found that especially true when President Ikeda first began visiting what was then the Soviet Union [1974]. The Soviet Union was, after all, a highly ideological nation. While its leaders did show an appreciation for the Soka Gakkai's movement for peace, culture and education, there were many pointed discussions on the subjects of religion and history.

Your warm smile was an important factor in those meetings. It helped both sides advance to a deeper mutual understanding, I thought.

K. IKEDA: As you know, wherever my husband goes, he's always breaking new ground, always pioneering. He's quite determined.

As a result, I think, he often comes on rather strong. I am happy if my presence does anything to make things go more smoothly and contribute to mutual understanding.

D. IKEDA: The crucial issue for me has always been whether my health will hold out for the length of a visit. My wife's help on that score is invaluable. I also know that after I'm asleep, she often stays up late chanting daimoku for me on the sofa in another room.

K. IKEDA: I don't know whether I should say this or not, but my husband is always running at full speed. His mind is always working. He's always giving attention to a hundred things at once.

The only time his brain gets any rest is when he's asleep. That's why I make him go to sleep. The moment his eyes are open, he's running here and there again. Isn't that right?

D. IKEDA: It's just my nature, the way that I am. You can change many things, they say, but not your nature.

Mr. Toda was a wonderful mentor. Everything I am is the result of the training I received from him. He was incredibly sharp, always quick to discern others' thoughts and feelings. If he sensed I was holding something back, he would tell me to come out with it — otherwise I'd be making an enemy of my mentor.

He kept me on my toes at all times. I was just a raw youth when we met, but he trained, forged and polished me.

Mr. Toda stressed caring for the members' welfare, personally making oneself familiar with their needs and desires and giving them hope and courage. He pounded the secret of leadership into me.

In other words, working for the members is the key to the development of the Soka Gakkai.

K. IKEDA: In his youth, they used to call my husband the X-ray. I'm sure it was because of his deep concern for people, but they used to say that he knew what you were thinking, that he could see through you at a glance. That was how wholeheartedly he gave of himself to kosen-rufu.

Seeing this, I was determined to do everything in my power to assist him, so that he could dedicate himself to the work that I knew he alone could do. We often say that he's the speedy hare, and I'm the slow and steady tortoise.... No, let's make that the crane and the tortoise, so that we'll both live a long time! [The crane and tortoise are symbols of long life in East Asia.]

MATSUOKA: I hope that you don't mind me asking such a personal question, but has President Ikeda ever taken you to task for something?

K. IKEDA: Yes, when I deserved it. I'm not perfect, after all.

Of course, he never reproved me without good reason.

One of the times I remember best was when he asked me to send a photograph to a member. He had paid a visit to the terminally ill brother of a member and took a photograph of him. When it was developed, he asked me to send it to the member.

But I delayed...not as long as a week, but perhaps four or five days. I thought that I should send a letter or note with it, and I was waiting until I had time to write one.

I finally sent it, late, and it arrived just two or three hours after the member's brother died. That's when he scolded me. I had no excuse. I felt so sorry for what I had done. If

only I had sent the photograph when he asked. You cannot imagine the shock and remorse I felt. It was a good lesson. Yes, I still remember that.

SASAKI: Assisting President Ikeda is a demanding task. I'm sure you're under constant stress.

MATSUOKA: Incidentally, I understand that you also meet with prefecture women's division chiefs when they gather in Tokyo for the monthly prefecture chiefs meetings, and that they share with you news about their activities in each region.

K. IKEDA: Lately I've been so busy that I can't always attend on a regular basis. And when I do, it's not as if I'm offering guidance or acting in a leadership role.

Women — myself included — want to have someone to listen to their thoughts and ideas. They also have many things that they want to communicate to President Ikeda. I always have the spirit that if listening at length to what they have to say imparts some joy and encouragement, and helps them engage in their activities with renewed energy, I'm only too glad to do it. After all, they're all working so hard.

When Things Really Started To Happen

D. IKEDA: I think it's important to listen to what women have to say. And men shouldn't berate women. They don't have the right. They should have nothing but praise for women's efforts.

Nichiren Daishonin said that we should respect people of strong faith, the people who have made vigorous efforts to propagate the Mystic Law, "as if they were Buddhas" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 781).

I never forget for even a fraction of a moment that it has been the hard work of our women's division members that has made the Soka Gakkai what it is today. Women bear an enormous burden. Many have to take care of their families, husbands, children and parents, facing the innumerable challenges of daily life and the larger issues of life that we all confront. That's no doubt why they know, from direct experience, how important faith is.

Men in our organization who do not value our women's division's contributions do not deserve to be leaders.

K. IKEDA: I'm grateful that my husband has always supported my growth.

Going back to our overseas travels, I especially recall 1974. We were busy that year with many overseas trips.

SASAKI: Yes, in January that year you went to Hong Kong, then North and South America in March and April. In the fall, you traveled to the Soviet Union. Your first trip to the People's Republic of China was in May, and you went there again in December. You hardly had time to catch your breath in such a travel-filled year.

MATSUOKA: Brazil was also on the schedule that year, wasn't it?

D. IKEDA: We applied for visas while we were in the United States, and we waited at the Malibu Training Center outside Los Angeles for them to come through. While we were waiting, we spent our days meeting with local members.

At the time, unfounded, negative rumors about the SGI were circulating in Brazil, and there was strong opposition to us entering the country. In the end, we couldn't get visas and had to change our plans.

SASAKI: The night that it was decided you wouldn't go to Brazil, you called Roberto Saito, then SGI-Brazil general director, from the second floor of the training center. I remember you saying, in a forceful, determined voice: "I don't want you showing any disappointment. Please present a cheerful face to the members and encourage them with all your might! Give them my fondest regards, too! I'll definitely make it there one day!"

Afterward you said: "I may not be able to go to Brazil, but there's still the rest of the world. The universe awaits us!"

D. IKEDA: That's when things really started to happen, isn't it? The leaders and members of SGI-Brazil prayed earnestly and opened the way for kosen-rufu in their country. Their prayers were answered, and they made a firm foundation for tremendous future growth, all through the power of strong daimoku.

Everything is always changing. The only indestructible, unchanging thing is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. If you chant daimoku, you are guaranteed to open new opportunities. You will achieve an unsurpassable state of being. Today, SGI-Brazil is making the best efforts in the world.

MATSUOKA: Eighteen years later, you finally visited Brazil. A wonderful culture festival was held, and we were all impressed by the vibrant energy of the Brazilian members, who were making remarkable contributions to their local communities and society at large.

After that visit, parks and streets were named after you, Mr. Makiguchi and Mr. Toda, and a number of schools incorporated the principles of Mr. Makiguchi's value-creating education into their curricula. Today Brazil understands the SGI and has great hopes for the role it will play in Brazilian society.

D. IKEDA: Those who worked so hard together to achieve this deserve the highest praise. This only goes to show that those who fight with all their might to triumph over painful obstacles and setbacks win without fail in the end. They contribute to the advancement of kosen-rufu.

K. IKEDA: 1974 was a hard year, what with the busy schedule and the uncertainty of our itinerary during our travels. But I know that the struggles of the members in each country far surpassed anything we experienced.

My husband presented me with a poem during that trip.

SASAKI: Could you share it with us?

K. IKEDA: Yes. "Opening the path / As I walk with you / My irreplaceable support."

When we were young, he wrote me many letters. But when I received this poem, I was deeply moved. He saw our shared struggles side by side all those years as a joint effort to promote kosen-rufu.

Whenever one of his dialogues is published, he says to me, "You're the one who made this book possible." And one year on my birthday [Feb. 27], he wrote calligraphy for me that read, "I pay tribute to a golden history of global achievement for kosen-rufu."

(To be continued)