

The Third Stage of Life Life Itself Is the Greatest Joy

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

K. IKEDA: When we visited the Philippines this year, the sunsets over Manila Bay were as spectacular as their reputation. As I watched the solemn majesty of nature in all its glory, I thought to myself that our third stage of life should be just as magnificent and beautiful.

D. IKEDA: Mr. Toda used to say that one's last years should be like a golden sunset. I absolutely agree, don't you?

They are the words of a master of life. As the sun sinks below the horizon, it colors the world scarlet, announcing the end of one day and promising the brilliant arrival of the next.

MATSUOKA: During your visit to the Philippines, you met King Juan Carlos I of Spain. You conveyed your congratulations to him for receiving the title of Knight Grand Cross of Rizal.

SASAKI: King Juan Carlos is respected in Spain and throughout the world for facilitating his country's transition from a fascist dictatorship to democratic rule.

D. IKEDA: Because of a military coup, his family fled to exile in Portugal. And when he was 10 years old, he was sent back to Spain as a virtual hostage to the military regime.

He underwent many hardships, but his father taught him well. His father told him that a royal family must love their country and instructed him to travel in Spain, so that the people would come to know him. He urged his son to stay in touch with people, so that they could learn to know and understand each other and finally to love each other.

And that's just what he did. The young prince traveled throughout the country, from village to village. His situation was very uncertain. At any moment, he might be presented with the jeweled crown of his ancestors or an arrest warrant from the security forces. Walking a fine line between glory and destruction, he carefully listened and watched. He spent 20 years quietly biding his time.

Soon after becoming king, he started his country toward democracy. He withstood a coup d'état in 1981, winning at the same time his people's strong support. All of this is well known the world over.

K. IKEDA: It was the suffering he experienced as a youth that made him the great leader he is today. What ultimately decides our course in life, after all, are the struggles and hardships we undergo and surmount. Many years of experience have taught me that.

D. IKEDA: Yes, that's so true.

My wife and I are like bow and arrow, like the *hiyoku* bird [a mythical bird with one body and two heads], like intertwined branches. We are companions and comrades-in-arms. We have fought almost half a century together in a fierce struggle — so fierce at times that we were uncertain whether we would live or die.

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SASAKI: We introduced this at the beginning of this series, but when you were interviewed by the editor of a women's magazine, President Ikeda, she asked you what kind of an award you would present to Mrs. Ikeda. You said how grateful you were for your wife's smile, and that you would give her the "Smile Award." You said, "When we are reborn, in the next life and the one after that, for all eternity, please be there for me."

What was your reaction, Mrs. Ikeda?

K. IKEDA: My, my, I don't know what to say. Meeting my husband has been my greatest good fortune, the decisive event in my life. In Buddhist terms, I think that you could say that it was due to fortune accumulated in my life from past existences.

But I must continue to accumulate good fortune in this lifetime, or I will simply roll backward like a stone down a hill. I therefore make an effort to do what I can each and every day to build the causes for future good fortune.

MATSUOKA: Just the other day we were speaking with your mother, Mrs. Ikeda. Though she's more than 90, she's full of energy. She told us about the morning that President Ikeda was inaugurated as the third Soka Gakkai president.

K. IKEDA: At that time [1960], we were living in a small house in Kobayashi-cho in Ota Ward [Tokyo]. That day, my mother came to help me get my husband ready for his inauguration. My mother was attending the Headquarters General Meeting, too, but first she went to Kamata Station and found a taxi that would come and take my husband to the meeting. Then she got herself ready and rushed to the meeting by train.

D. IKEDA: Yes. On that day, I remember taking a taxi to the Nihon University Auditorium in Ryogoku [Tokyo], where the inauguration was held. You see, I rarely took taxis in those days. Even after becoming president, I commuted to the Soka Gakkai Headquarters in Shinanomachi by train each day. I rode my bicycle to Kamata Station and took the Keihin Tohoku Line to Tokyo Station. There I transferred to the Chuo Line, then got off at Yotsuya and transferred again to the Sobu Line, which stopped at Shinanomachi. Ah, I was young!

And the Soka Gakkai didn't own any cars then. We had very few facilities for our members. In fact, we had almost nothing.

SASAKI: At that time, I had just come to Tokyo from Yamagata Prefecture, and I was attending a private cram school in Ichigaya. When I transferred to the Sobu Line at Yotsuya Station one day, I saw you standing on the platform, reading a book and waiting for your train. I introduced myself and told you that I was studying for my university entrance exams, and you encouraged me. "Do your best!" you said.

D. IKEDA: Is that right? I met so many Soka Gakkai members on the train and on the platform. Some days, I worked so hard that I wore myself out and had to take a taxi home. My wife or someone would go to Kamata Station and pick up the bike I had parked there in the morning, so that I could use it to get to the station again the next morning.

MATSUOKA: The evening of the day you became president, a couple from Kansai, close acquaintances of yours, went to your house in Kobayashi-cho to congratulate you and celebrate. When they arrived, the house was quiet. As they opened the door to the entranceway, they saw it had been cleaned and sprinkled with fresh water in anticipation of

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guests. You came out and said: “I wonder if everyone is hesitating, because now I’m president? Nobody has come to see me!” Then you invited them in.

SASAKI: When Mrs. Ikeda brought them tea and served it, you pointed to your wife and said with a smile: “We haven’t had any celebrations here today. I was expecting a festive treat of rice with red beans, but she didn’t prepare it! She didn’t so much as say congratulations.”

You had implored her, “At the very least, cook us some rice with red beans!” But your wife had replied: “I’m sorry, but I think of tonight as the funeral service for the Ikeda family. That’s why I didn’t prepare rice with red beans. There’s no sea bream to celebrate, either.”

MATSUOKA: The couple were surprised at how different from usual both of you seemed that night. They noticed that you in particular, Mrs. Ikeda, were not your usual smiling self but seemed somber and reserved. In your unsmiling presence, they said they sensed a strong determination and resolution — as if you were steeling yourself for what lay ahead.

K. IKEDA: I was resolved to face whatever happened from the moment I married my husband. But it was certainly true that when he became president our private life underwent a complete transformation. His public role and duties continued much as they had before, but now my private life, too, completely disappeared.

MATSUOKA: Mr. Sasaki and I once interviewed President Ikeda’s mother, Ichi, some 20 years ago. We went to her home and, after we introduced ourselves as *Seikyo Shimbun* reporters, she knelt on the tatami and, placing her hands together in a gesture of formal greeting, said with great courtesy: “Thank you for supporting Daisaku. I hope you will continue to do so in the future.”

SASAKI: We were surprised, even embarrassed. We were young and unimportant. Her action gave us a precious glimpse of the kind of family that you grew up in. She emanated a most natural, refined dignity.

D. IKEDA: From the time I began my apprenticeship with Mr. Toda, I hardly had the chance to see my mother. But she was always my mother, and she was always concerned about my health. She lived to be 80. Just before she died, she said to me with a smile: “I have enjoyed my life. I have won.”

MATSUOKA: Mrs. Ikeda, I wonder if you could tell us a little about the last years of your father, Shigeji Shiraki. He was so well loved by the members. They used to call him Grandpa Shiraki. He joined the Gakkai before the war and was greatly trusted by Mr. Toda for his steadfast faith. Mr. Toda wrote a poem for him:

*As long as you are in Jonan [southern Tokyo]
I am confident
Our citadel is safe
On its solid foundation*

K. IKEDA: He lived to be 85. About a year before he died, he caught a cold and from then on occasionally was confined to his bed. One day I had a call from my mother: “I’m

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worried,” she said. “Your father is acting strange. He’s saying things like: ‘This coverlet is as soft as silk.’ ‘I’m in a beautiful forest.’ ‘It’s a palace.’”

D. IKEDA: Yes. I was very busy at the time and couldn’t visit him for awhile. When I finally managed to see him, he was resting underneath a cotton coverlet in a small room in his home. He conversed normally and seemed to be alert and in his right mind. Explaining what he had been saying with a satisfied smile, he said that sometimes he felt as if his surroundings were transformed.

“This bedding is so comfortable, just as if it were a nobleman’s silver-and-gold-silk-brocade quilt,” he said. “And I can see a wonderful world — a field covered with flowers and a beautiful forest glade filled with the sound of an ineffably beautiful melody. It’s as wonderful as if I were in some sort of palace.”

MATSUOKA: I remember his kind, smiling face.

D. IKEDA: I told my wife and mother-in-law not to worry: “He may be remembering something from a past existence or enjoying something that awaits him in the future,” I said. “Perhaps he’s experiencing the great joy he’ll know in the future as a result of the great good fortune and benefit he has accumulated from the past and in this existence. It’s as if he were dwelling in the state of Buddhahood.”

As Nichiren Daishonin says: “When you climb the mountain of wondrous enlightenment and gaze around you in all directions, then to your amazement you will see that the entire universe is the land of Tranquil Light. The ground will be of lapis lazuli, and the eight paths will be set apart by golden ropes. Four kinds of flowers will fall from the heavens, and music will resound in the air. All Buddhas and bodhisattvas will be present in complete joy, caressed by the breezes of eternity, happiness, true self and purity. The time is fast approaching when we too will count ourselves among their number” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 3, pp. 216–17).

K. IKEDA: My mother, who thought my father was losing his wits, was tremendously relieved by my husband’s words of encouragement. For about the last 10 years of his life, each time he finished gongyo my father used to open the Gosho and read the passage “Although I and my disciples may encounter various difficulties, if we do not harbor doubts in our hearts, we will as a matter of course attain Buddhahood” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 180). My mother joined the Soka Gakkai because her health was poor, but as we mentioned earlier, she’s still healthy and active today.

SASAKI: Their stories give one a sense of the wondrous flow of life from past to present to future. And of the indestructible state of being that those who have persevered in faith all their lives attain without fail. Thank you for sharing them with us.

K. IKEDA: I have been a member since I was an elementary school student. When I look back on my life, I feel deeply, every day, just how wonderful Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism is. It has the power to transform sadness into joy, pain into gladness. It gives us the confidence to overcome whatever difficulties we may face.

D. IKEDA: Mr. Toda often used to say that Buddhism enables us to savor life itself as the greatest joy. I think he was 100 percent right. Those who remain steadfast in their faith and work for kosen-rufu throughout their lives will, without fail, experience a happy, dignified

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death. I have come to this firm conclusion after years of experience with many, many people.

SASAKI: Power, wealth, fame and learning are all powerless in the face of death.

D. IKEDA: Yes. As Victor Hugo said, “We are all under sentence of death, but with a sort of indefinite reprieve.”

We all want to face our final moments calm and composed — and in triumph. That’s what our faith is for.

To die in sadness and sorrow, filled with regret — that is death as defeat. I hope all our members will persevere in their faith and live so that in the end they can say with pride and confidence, “I have triumphed.”

MATSUOKA: President Ikeda, Mrs. Ikeda, thank you both for allowing us to realize this series. We also must express our appreciation to the readers for their support.

SASAKI: Yes, thank you very much.

(This concludes “The Third Stage of Life” dialogue)