

## Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra 26

*This is the twenty-sixth installment of an ongoing discussion on the Lotus Sutra among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and Vice Chiefs Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. It appeared in the March 1997 issue of the Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai study journal.*

*What is the meaning of human existence in the boundless expanse of the universe? What is death? Is life eternal? What is the meaning of "life" given that we must all eventually die? How does the Lotus Sutra answer these fundamental questions of human existence? In this installment the participants begin a discussion on the "Life Span of the Thus Come One" (sixteenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, which contains the sutra's central teaching. Tracing the main developments of the chapter, they touch on the importance of having a sound view of life and death, and the significance of the SGI movement in leading the way toward an "age of inquiry into life."*

### 26 An Irrepressible Zest for Life—the Spirit of the "Life Span" Chapter

**Katsuji Saito:** Recently a great deal of attention has been focused on training that prepares people for the inevitability of death. Participants in these workshops and seminars engage in various programs. They may be told, for example, that they only have six months to live. They are then asked to decide how they would spend those final six months. Another approach might be to have people rank the three most important things to them in life. What these techniques seem to suggest is that thinking about death involves a refocusing on life.

**Takanori Endo:** It seems that in Europe and the United States, these seminars are also included in the curriculum of many schools. I understand there is even a program somewhere designed for elementary school students.

In Japan, too, given the unprecedented "graying" of society, it seems that more attention is being paid nowadays to issues of aging and death. All the same, I think that far too few people reflect on death as an issue that involves them personally.

**Daisaku Ikeda:** In life, nothing is more certain than the fact that one will some day die. Everything else is indefinite and subject to change; death alone is a fact of eternal certainty.

And yet, people try to turn away from this most certain of all things. While it may be true that, as the saying goes, "You cannot gaze directly at the sun or at death," the lives of those who lack a sound understanding of life and death are like rootless grass. There is no question that without a perspective on death one cannot lead a stable and sure-footed life.

**Haruo Suda:** I think that to avert one's eyes from death is comparable to averting one's eyes from one's true self. Incidentally, I notice that young people these days seem to be increasingly interested in learning about their past lives. One

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psychiatrist theorizes that this is because today's youth, finding it difficult to ground their identity in their present self, are seeking to discover roots of identity in a self of the past.<sup>1</sup>

**Ikeda:** That may be so. On a superficial level, such a tendency might seem like nothing more than a passing fad. But on a deeper level, it may well be a sign of people's heartfelt yearning for a firmer foundation on which to base their lives.

One of the more salient characteristics of modern civilization has been the treatment of death as something taboo and not to be talked about. But, the current boom in seminars and workshops about death the world over suggests that this tendency is rapidly changing. People today are earnestly seeking a clear-sighted understanding of life and death. I sense an ardent pulse of inquiry into the mystery of life.

### **A Buddhist Movement for Both Young and Old To Learn About Life and Death**

**Suda:** I feel we have truly begun making our way down the runway toward the twenty-first century, the "century of life."

**Ikeda:** From the standpoint of helping people learn about life and death, I think we can say that the SGI study movement is on society's cutting edge.

**Saito:** Yes. Through our study movement, both young and old are continually deepening their understanding of the Buddhist view of life and death. For instance, I heard about an 80-year-old grandmother who was among the candidates who took the essay exam administered in Japan last year for the rank of professor. The theme she chose for her essay was life and death.

I understand that afterwards she remarked: "Never in my life have I studied so hard. In the process of learning about the Buddhist view of life as transcending the three existences of past, present and future, the prospect of dying no longer made me afraid." The fact that members are acquiring such insight through participating in study activities is really remarkable.

### **A Life of Pride in Having Won**

**Ikeda:** That's right. This is true learning. Buddhist study in the SGI is by no means limited to simply memorizing philosophical principles.

We must also learn from the way people die. People who have died, whomever they may be, are our "seniors in life" by virtue of their having preceded us in experiencing death. This is true even if the deceased was younger than we are, even if they were a child.

**Endo:** I am reminded of an episode involving a 9-year-old boy who died of leukemia. It is described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who is well known for her

work counseling the terminally ill and investigating near-death experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Jeffy, the boy in question, had been in and out of hospitals since the age of 3. By the time of his last visit, he was extremely weak, and Dr. Ross realized that he had only a few weeks left to live. Jeffy announced with a sense of great urgency that he wanted to go home "today." Dr. Ross talked with his parents, who were worried and reluctant to comply with their son's wishes. She finally persuaded the parents and accompanied them home.

When they arrived in the garage, Jeffy got out of the car and said to his father, "Take my bicycle down from the wall." It was a brand-new bicycle that his father had bought for him three years ago, but that he had never been able to ride. It was Jeffy's dream to once in his life ride around his neighborhood on his bicycle.

Jeffy was barely able to stand on his feet. He had his father put training wheels on the bicycle, and then said to Dr. Ross, "You are here to hold my mom back." She writes:

Therefore I held mom back, and her husband held me back. We held each other back and learned the hard way how painful and difficult it sometimes is in the face of a very vulnerable, terminally ill child to allow him the victory and the risk to fall and hurt and bleed.

And he then drove off on his solo journey on the bicycle around the neighborhood.

**Suda:** Did he make it back unhurt?

**Endo:** Yes. She writes: "He came back, the proudest man you have ever seen. He was beaming, smiling from one ear to the other. He looked like somebody who had won the gold medal in the Olympics."

One week later Jeffy died. And a week after that Dougy, Jeffy's younger brother, whose birthday it was, related how after the bicycling episode Jeffy, without their parents' knowledge, had given him the bicycle for a birthday present. "Jeff had told Dougy that he wanted the pleasure of personally giving him his most beloved bicycle. But he could not wait another two weeks until it was Dougy's birthday, because by then he would be dead." He thus was taking care of his "unfinished business."

Dr. Ross continues: "The parents had a lot of grief, but no grief work, no fear, no guilt, no shame.... They had the memory of this ride around the block and that beaming face of Jeffy."

According to Dr. Ross, everyone has a purpose. "In all my work with patients, I learned that whether they are chronic schizophrenics, severely retarded children, or dying patients, each one has a purpose. Each one cannot only learn and be helped by you, but can actually become your teacher."<sup>3</sup>

**Ikeda:** What a moving episode! That young boy died having won a victory.

I think it was Yoshida Shoin<sup>4</sup> who said: "A person who dies at ten experiences

the four seasons of spring, summer, fall and winter in ten years. A person who dies at twenty has the four seasons in twenty years. Those who die at thirty, fifty or a hundred also each experience the four seasons in their years."<sup>5</sup>

Shoin was thoroughly committed to his beliefs. Though he was executed at the age of 29, because he based himself on such a view of life and death, he was not daunted in the least by the prospect of death. In a sense, the key issue is whether one dies having achieved what one needs to achieve; whether one dies with pride in having won.

To learn about death is to learn how to live. Once on a philosophy exam, the French philosopher Alain<sup>6</sup> postulated the following situation, "A young woman is about to jump off the parapet of the Boieldieu Bridge," and directed his students to explain what they would say to keep her from jumping.<sup>7</sup> If you were to come upon someone seriously debating whether to live or die, what would you say to the person? Therein lies true philosophy. It might seem that this question pertains to an extreme and special situation, but in fact that is not the case. The question of how one ought to live as a human being is a fundamental issue that has been asked at all times, in all places and by all people.

### **Death Has To Be Considered As a Personal Issue**

**Suda:** That's right. A psychiatrist describes how he had asked a youth who had unsuccessfully attempted to commit suicide, "Why did you try to commit suicide?" Turning the doctor's words around, the youth immediately shot back, "Why are you living?" leaving him at a loss for a response. "I was really stumped," he says, describing his reaction. "Dying and living were opposites; they were like the two sides of a coin. Unless you can clearly articulate the significance of your own way of life and existence, you cannot tell another person, 'You must not die.'"<sup>8</sup>

**Saito:** It is certainly difficult to consider life and death as personal issues. No matter how eloquent someone may be in philosophizing about life or explaining theories of life and death, it will all count for nothing if deep down the person views such matters as pertaining only to others.

One physician explains that it took the death of his own child before he was able to come to grips with the meaning of life. He writes that whereas formerly, when he had cured a patient of illness, he would be filled with pride as a doctor, "With the death of my own child, for the first time I started to think about the death of my patients. In going from viewing it as 'another person's death' to viewing it as 'my own death,' I felt that I wanted to erase myself out of shame and a sense of guilt."<sup>9</sup>

**Endo:** That's a heart-rending confession.

**Ikeda:** The experience of losing a loved one impels us toward a deeper understanding of life. Josei Toda, the second Soka Gakkai president, would talk

about the profound sadness he felt at the death of his daughter. She had passed away some years before he took faith. He recounted how he had cried the night through holding her cold body in his arms:

The day my daughter died was the saddest day in my life.... I thought to myself, "What if my wife were to die?" That brought me to tears. And then my wife did indeed die. Later I wondered what I would do if my mother died. I was, of course, very fond of my mother. Pursuing things still further, I shuddered at the thought of my own death.

While in prison during the war, I devoted some time to reading the Lotus Sutra, and one day I suddenly understood. I had finally found the answer. It took me more than twenty years to solve the question of death. I had wept all night long over my daughter's death, and I dreaded my wife's death and the thought that I, too, would die. It's because I was finally able to answer this riddle that I became the president of the Soka Gakkai.<sup>10</sup>

For human beings, to fear death is natural. Even President Toda struggled with the prospect of death. It's impossible that someone could have no fear of death, or could be entirely indifferent to whether they lived or died. The only way is to have struggled hard to develop such a resolute state of life.

Everyone fears and is saddened by death. That is natural. But by struggling to overcome the pain and sadness that accompanies death, we become more aware of the dignity of life and develop the spirit to share the sufferings of others as our own.

**Endo:** I understand what you're saying very well. I myself was in that position. Twelve years ago, my eldest son, who was then 4 years old, contracted bronchopneumonia and suddenly died. At the time, it was all I could do to contain my grief. I was in a daze.

But thanks to the repeated encouragement that I received from you, President Ikeda, and others, I became able to directly face the reality of my son's death. I really feel boundless gratitude for the support everyone showed me.

From then on, with your words to me, "This will definitely have meaning for your life," ever in mind, I began chanting much more earnestly. I read the Goshō and hungrily studied your guidance. In everything, I found fresh meaning. Everything touched me with new impact. I felt as though my life had been cleansed.

I keenly feel that without having gone through the ordeal of losing my son, I probably would not have been able to develop the deep conviction I now have in faith. And I'm afraid I would have remained rather shallow in my ability to understand people's sincerity or the profundity of life. I might add that I am personally confident that my child has been reborn.

**Ikeda:** I also feel certain that is the case. Buddhism teaches the principle of the oneness of parent and child. You are giving many people hope by discussing the

Lotus Sutra and sharing your personal perspective on the eternity of life. In your efforts in faith, the life of your deceased son is at one with your own. Whether he is presently in the phase of life or the phase of death, your son, because of the oneness of parent and child, fully shares the benefit of your efforts.

**Endo:** Yes. Thank you very much.

**Ikeda:** Life is long. And it is not all clear skies. There are rainy days and days of fierce wind. But no matter what happens, as long as we maintain our faith, in the end everything that happens will turn into benefit. President Toda would say: "As long as you have faith, everything will be your benefit. On the other hand if you lose faith and have doubts, everything will be punishment."<sup>11</sup>

We have to live out our lives with firm belief in the eternity of life. Through our victory in this life, we show proof of life's eternity. This is the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, and of the "Life Span" chapter. No matter what happens, we have to continue living, we have to survive; this is the spirit of the "Life Span" chapter.

**Saito:** The "Life Span" chapter teaches life's eternity not simply as words or as a philosophical concept, but as a reality that we can directly experience. This is its essence.

### **We Can Manifest the Eternal Life of the Universe**

**Ikeda:** It is to live with great vitality. The "Life Span" chapter reveals the boundlessness of life, which is eternal and as vast as the universe. And the practice of the "Life Span" chapter is to manifest that immense life in the reality of our own lives. The unabbreviated title of the chapter (Jp. Nyorai Juryo) means "fathom the life span of the Thus Come One." The practice, in other words, is to cause the great and eternal life force of the Buddha to well forth in one's own being.

The "eternal life" described in the "Life Span" chapter is the life of the universe, endowed with infinite vitality, wisdom and compassion, that sustains all living beings. The "Life Span" chapter clarifies that this life is itself Shakyamuni's true identity, and the true entity of all Buddhas. This is consistent with President Toda's realization that the Buddha is life.

This eternal life is also the Mystic Law, the Thus Come One, the essential nature of the Law, and the true entity. It is the fundamental Law of the universe that pervades all phenomena in the ten worlds and the three thousand realms. The Daishonin identified this eternal life as Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Life and death are the mysterious functions, the innate rhythm, of this eternal life of the universe. Viewed solely in terms of the phenomena of life and death, life is impermanent. These "sufferings of life and death" and "sufferings of impermanence" are the wellspring of all human suffering. Shakyamuni worked exhaustively to teach people this.

This is certainly not just some kind of old wives' tale. The sufferings of life and death lie at the foundation of all the sufferings of modern society. The "Life Span" chapter's teaching of "eternal life" is the good medicine to cure these sufferings of

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life and death.

**Saito:** Yes. Nichiren Daishonin states that the essential teaching for solving the sufferings of life and death is to be found only in the “Life Span” chapter (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1022).

**Ikeda:** I think there are many people who have studied the “Life Span” chapter many times already. For that matter, we’re all reciting it each day during gongyo. But to confirm the basics, why don’t we begin by going over the outline of the chapter?

### **The Teaching of Shakyamuni’s Enlightenment in the Remote Past Overturns All Earlier Teachings**

**Suda:** Okay. The “Emerging from the Earth” (fifteenth) chapter describes the appearance of countless splendid bodhisattvas from within the ground. Bodhisattva Maitreya asks Shakyamuni to explain just when and where he instructed these myriad bodhisattvas. In response, Shakyamuni begins expounding the “Life Span” chapter.

**Endo:** Just a few decades had passed since Shakyamuni attained enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree. Thus it would have been impossible for him, in such a short time, to have instructed such a vast number of bodhisattvas to the point of their being practically on a par with the Buddha himself in level of attainment. This is the substance of Maitreya’s question.

**Ikeda:** Seeing the wonderful appearance of these disciples, Maitreya must have wondered: “Just what kind of being is my mentor? He must be a person of far greater attainment than I had previously imagined.”

**Saito:** That’s right. And Shakyamuni’s response takes the form of his revelation at the outset of the “Life Span” chapter that he in fact attained enlightenment in the remote past. In the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings and the first half (or theoretical teaching) of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni had taught that he first attained enlightenment during his present lifetime in India. But here he completely overturns this teaching, revealing that “it has been immeasurable, boundless ... kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood.”

**Ikeda:** In other words, Shakyamuni did not become a Buddha for the first time in his present existence. Rather, he had been a Buddha all along.

**Endo:** Everyone must have been very surprised. After all, this is exactly the opposite of what he had said previously.

**Suda:** Some may well have reacted with alarm, thinking: “What! Have I been

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deceived all this time!"

**Saito:** Shakyamuni discards his provisional status as the Buddha who attained enlightenment for the first time in his present existence and reveals his true identity as the Buddha enlightened since the remote past. This is termed "casting off the transient and revealing the true." I think it might be a good idea for us to go over the meaning of this concept in depth on another occasion.

**Ikeda:** I agree. It is a very profound doctrine. Also, it relates to the matter of time without beginning, or *kuon ganjo*. I propose we discuss it later in light of the overall flow of the "Life Span" chapter.

**Suda:** *Gohyaku-jintengo* is a metaphor used to indicate the extremely distant time in the past when Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood. It is described as follows:

Suppose a person were to take five hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million *nayuta asamkhya* thousand-millionfold worlds and grind them to dust. Then, moving eastward, each time he passes five hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million *nayuta asamkhya* worlds he drops a particle of dust. (LS16, 225)

We might imagine the person to be traveling in a rocket ship or something. In any event, he continues to the east in this manner until he has dropped every particle of dust.

**Endo:** *Nayuta* and *asogi* are ancient Indian numerical units; they are both enormous numbers of ten to numerous tens of powers. According to one source, a *nayuta* is equal to the number one followed by eleven zeros (a hundred billion), and an *asogi* is equal to one followed by fifty-one zeros.

The thousand-millionfold world indicates the universe as conceived in the worldview of the day. The number of lands passed in the manner that you described is utterly beyond calculation; one cannot even begin to imagine such an enormous number.

**Suda:** That's right. But we're not done yet. Surprisingly, it says that if all the worlds that have been passed so far, whether they received a particle or not, are then ground to dust, and that each of these particles of dust represents one aeon. An aeon is an extremely long period of time; according to one explanation, it is equal to about 16 million years.

The time since Shakyamuni attained enlightenment is said to surpass even the utterly incalculable period of time represented by all these particles of dust, by "a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million *nayuta asamkhya kalpas*" (LS16, 225). This total period of time since his enlightenment is termed *gohyaku-jintengo*.

**Endo:** It truly boggles the mind.

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**Suda:** Shakyamuni's having attained enlightenment at such a remote time in the past is termed his actual attainment in the remote past.

**Saito:** Since he explains that he actually attained enlightenment at that particular time in the remote past, we get the sense that there was a point of beginning. On one level, therefore, *gohyaku-jintengo* may be thought of as representing a limited period of time, albeit a very long one. In substance, however, it seems that Shakyamuni is here trying to describe an infinite period of time.

**Ikeda:** He's trying to somehow express the idea of the eternal.

### **The Eternal Buddha Exists Here and Now**

**Suda:** This teaching of his enlightenment in the remote past alone would have been enough to, as the saying goes, "startle the heavens and shake the earth." But Shakyamuni follows this up by making a declaration that overturns what had until that time been the prevailing common wisdom. Namely, he explains that ever since he attained Buddhahood at that remote time in the past, he has been constantly in this *saha* world expounding the Law and instructing people.

**Endo:** In the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, he had explained that the *saha* world was an impure land defiled with earthly desires, and that the Buddha dwells in a pure land located elsewhere. The Pure Land of Perfect Bliss in the west or the Emerald Land to the east are well-known examples.

But in the "Life Span" chapter, he says that this *saha* world is the pure land where the Buddha, enlightened since the remote past, dwells eternally. A pure land is also called a Land of Tranquil Light. The principle that the *saha* world is itself the Land of Tranquil Light is another landmark teaching of the "Life Span" chapter.

**Saito:** The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai of China calls this the "mystic principle of the True Land."

**Suda:** More mysterious still, Shakyamuni explains that he has been teaching people not only in this world, but in countless other lands.

**Endo:** We can only imagine the Buddha enlightened since the remote past as in some sense pervading the entire universe.

**Ikeda:** That's right. He can be thought of as a Buddha who dwells anywhere in the entire universe and who may appear anywhere to lead beings to enlightenment. For precisely that reason, we can say that the *saha* world—the place we live here and now—is the pure land where the Buddha, enlightened since the remote past, dwells eternally.

**Suda:** The mysterious preaching continues. Shakyamuni, as the Buddha enlightened since the remote past, explains that the discussions he held in the past where he mentioned other Buddhas with various names living at different times had been merely an expedient means that he employed to lead people to enlightenment.

**Endo:** Shakyamuni explains that those Buddhas were all provisional Buddhas.

**Suda:** “Provisional Buddha” means a Buddha who exists as the shadow of the true Buddha. If the true Buddha is like the moon in the sky, a provisional Buddha is like the moon’s reflection in a pond.

**Saito:** Shakyamuni, understood as having attained enlightenment for the first time during his present lifetime in India, is also such a provisional Buddha.

**Ikeda:** The purpose of the “Life Span” chapter is to explain that all living beings, not just Shakyamuni, have in fact been Buddhas since the remote past; and to cause people to become aware of this. Its purpose is to open people’s eyes to the great and eternal life of the universe. And it is Nichiren Daishonin’s revelation of the implicit teaching of the Lotus Sutra [Nam-myoho-renge-kyo] that makes it possible on a practical level for people to do so.

President Toda said: “The ultimate purpose of practicing the Daishonin’s Buddhism is to awaken to the eternity of life. It is to realize with one’s entire being that life is eternal. When we do so, we experience absolute happiness. This happiness continues eternally; it can never be destroyed. We practice faith in order to establish such a state of happiness.”<sup>13</sup>

The important thing is that we realize this with our entire being. And the only way to do that is through faith; by polishing and deepening our faith. President Toda would often say, “To understand something intellectually is easy; but to grasp it through faith is entirely different.”<sup>14</sup> This is certainly true of the eternity of life.

### “Enlightenment” in the Latter Day Means Faith in the Gohonzon

**Suda:** For that matter, regarding President Toda’s enlightenment while in prison,<sup>15</sup> there have been inquiries from readers wondering whether they can have the same experience.

**Ikeda:** For many people, the word *enlightenment* seems to have associations with mystical powers, such as the ability to remember past lives or to see into the future. But that is certainly not the case. Those who casually speak of enlightenment in such terms are definitely frauds.

President Toda remarked: “What is enlightenment in the Latter Day of the Law? It is to believe wholeheartedly in the Gohonzon.”<sup>16</sup> Not to doubt the Gohonzon no matter what happens, to believe earnestly—this is enlightenment in the Latter Day. Faith in the Gohonzon itself equals enlightenment.

To illustrate, there might be someone who agonizes over his home situation. The

person lives in anguish, feeling that he is the most miserable person in the world. He feels resentment toward others and complains constantly. However, as a result of opening his eyes to faith and learning about Buddhism, he comes to understand that the causes of his misery are within his own life. He then strives to carry out his human revolution. As his faith deepens and his state of life expands, he is able to splendidly overcome his sufferings.

Through this experience, the person grasps the truth that when one's frame of mind or spirit changes, everything changes. This is the case of embodying the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, or *ichinen sanzen*. Isn't this an instance of brilliant enlightenment?

**Suda:** Members who have had such experiences are numerous. Indeed, they could well be described as countless.

**Ikeda:** Of course, President Toda possessed a wonderful state of life uniquely his own. But it was inseparable from his absolute, unparalleled confidence in the Gohonzon; no one could match his strength of conviction. His state of life was that of great confidence itself.

### The True Nature of Life and Death

**Endo:** Continuing with our summary of the "Life Span" chapter, Shakyamuni explains that the Buddha enlightened since the remote past is able to manifest various forms and guide people to enlightenment because he "perceives the true aspect of the threefold world exactly as it is" (LS16, 226).

**Saito:** "Threefold world" means the actual world where beings who have not eradicated illusion dwell.

**Ikeda:** The phrase, "The Thus Come One perceives the true aspect of the threefold world exactly as it is," refers to the wisdom of the Buddha to discern the true aspect of all things. Because he possesses this wisdom, the Buddha can freely expound teachings in accord with people's capacity.

What, then, is the true nature of life and death as seen with the eye of the Buddha? This is described in the next passage.

**Saito:** Yes. Shakyamuni says, "There is no ebb or flow of birth and death, and there is no existing in this world and later entering extinction" (LS16, 226). In the threefold world, there is neither birth nor death, there is neither withdrawing from this world nor appearing in it. Accordingly, there is no distinction between those presently in the world and those who have died.

**Suda:** It seems to me that this clarifies the eternal existence of life.

From a common sense standpoint, we can only think of birth as appearing in the world and of death as withdrawing from it. But from the Buddha's perspective, birth and death are only alternating phases of life, which is itself eternal.

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**Ikeda:** That's right. But the statement, "There is no ... birth and death," emphasizes the eternal aspect of life. Then again, if we were only to think of life from that angle, we may fall into abstraction. After all, life and death are realities of existence. To ignore them, therefore, is to engage in theoretical speculation.

Nichiren Daishonin goes one step further in saying, "We repeat the cycle of birth and death secure upon the earth of our intrinsically enlightened nature" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 724). Life and death based on the Mystic Law are themselves dramas on "the earth of our intrinsically enlightened nature," or the eternal stage of the great life of the universe. When we realize that we are in some sense enacting a drama, our existence becomes a source of inexhaustible joy. Life and death are not fraught with suffering; they are filled with joy. This is how we realize the ultimate state of life in which "life is joyful and death is joyful, too."

The Mystic Law is the great beneficial medicine for overcoming the sufferings of life and death. The "Life Span" chapter says, "This is a highly effective medicine" (LS16, 228).

The members of the SGI who day in and day out are unsparingly using their minds and their bodies for the sake of the Law and for the sake of friends are truly advancing along the path of victory in life over eternity.

**Saito:** How noble it is to live out one's life based on faith in the Mystic Law! How truly fortunate we are!

### **A Drama in Which Life Is Joyful and Death Is Joyful, Too**

**Suda:** There are countless examples in the SGI of people who have enacted this wonderful drama of life and death. I have heard about the experience of the grandmother-in-law of an acquaintance of mine. Her name was Chiyo Nakatani, and she died four years ago [in 1993] at the age of 76. She was survived by eight children and their spouses, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In all, thirty-seven members of her family were there chanting daimoku for her when she passed away. The members of the family are all active at the ward, headquarters, chapter or district levels of the organization. When they all get together, it's like a chapter general meeting.

**Endo:** Did she have any living siblings or relatives of her own generation?

**Suda:** No. Her parents and siblings died when she was young, and because she had moved away from her native village, it seems she had been without a single living relative.

During and after the war, she lost two husbands, and a number of her children. In 1956, while struggling hard to raise those children who survived, she joined the Soka Gakkai. She reportedly developed strong confidence in faith as a result of having overcome cancer.

The husband of one of her granddaughters is an acquaintance of mine. Everyone in the family would say that she was "like a mountain." She carried

through with unswerving faith, not flinching in the least no matter how fiercely the storms of destiny might blow.

If her children would complain about how difficult their life was, she would tell them: "If your stomach were full, you might not be able to practice faith correctly. Isn't it because you have a lot of difficulties that you can earnestly exert yourself in activities? You should be appreciative."

She brought the family business to a certain level of prosperity, and was able to provide a home for each of her children in the Shirogane area of Tokyo's Minato Ward. She reportedly remained active as a district-level leader during her later years, taking particular joy in propagation activities.

She was always citing passages of the Goshō. One of her favorite passages goes: "This body of ours in the end will become nothing more than the soil of the hills and fields. Therefore, it is useless to begrudge your life, for though you may wish to, you cannot cling to it forever. Even people who live a long time rarely live beyond the age of 100. And all the events of a lifetime are like the dream one dreams in a brief nap" (MW-3, 215).

### **"I Received My Long Life From the Gohonzon"**

**Endo:** I have also heard the experience of Yuki Katsura of Tokyo's Suginami Ward. When Mrs. Katsura died last October, reportedly more than 360 people came to attend her funeral, including members of the local senior citizens group and many shopkeepers.

For the funeral of an 84-year-old woman who lived in a block housing complex and did not have any particular status in society, this was quite unusual. It became quite a topic of conversation.

Although she was tough enough to single-handedly raise four daughters, it seems that Mrs. Katsura herself had been born two months prematurely, and that as an adult she had a very slight build, weighing less than eighty-eight pounds. Toward the end of her life, she weighed only sixty-one pounds. Nonetheless, she remained extremely energetic and cheerful.

Mrs. Katsura would often say, "It really shouldn't have been possible for me to live this long. I received my long life from the Gohonzon." Ten years ago her doctor thought that she might have cancer. Throughout the time she was hospitalized, she chanted resolute daimoku, saying, "I entrust everything to the Gohonzon. If I have a mission, I will recover without fail."

After her discharge, she remained active with the local senior citizens' group and took great pleasure in helping others. She did not seem the least fatigued or worn down by her active life.

**Suda:** She must have been well trusted in the community.

**Endo:** She also worked tirelessly as a district leader, and it seems that each month she would get at least one new person to start taking the *Seikyo Shimbun* newspaper or other publications.

On the day she passed away, she had been planning to go out somewhere for the first time in a long time with her four children. The previous day she had gone to the beauty shop. On the morning of the appointed day, the members of her family came to her room to find that she had passed away peacefully.

She had apparently been kneeling on her bed, and had fallen forward. Her daughters found her lying there peacefully with her eyes closed. Her skin was lustrous. The physician who came out to the house reportedly remarked that he hoped to die so peacefully himself.

Although the funeral did not take place until nearly a week later, her face still had a pink hue and she seemed to have grown younger by the day. In relating their impressions, it was reported that even many non-members were so impressed by her appearance that they could only attribute it to her faith.

### **Develop the State of Buddhahood During This Lifetime**

**Ikeda:** I heard reports about both Mrs. Nakatani and Mrs. Katsura. Such people are pillars of the Soka Gakkai. They are true practitioners of the Lotus Sutra. They are most respectable. Their lives are a model for all.

There are countless such people in the SGI. The phrase in the Goshō passage you cited a moment ago, “Even people who live a long time rarely live beyond the age of one hundred,” is really true. President Toda would often remark, “One hundred years from now everyone here will be dead.”

This world is like a “dream one dreams in a brief nap.” From the standpoint of eternity, there is hardly any difference between a “long” and a “short” life. Therefore, it’s not whether one’s life is long or short, but how one lives that is important. It is what we accomplish, the degree to which we develop our state of life, the number of people we help become happy—this is what matters.

Those who firmly establish the state of Buddhahood in their lives will enjoy this state of life eternally. This is what attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime means.

**Saito:** In other words, even if our life is short, we can still use it to establish a state of happiness and fulfillment that continues over eternity.

**Ikeda:** That’s right. That’s a fundamental Buddhist principle. At the same time, I always pray that SGI members will enjoy excellent health and longevity.

The “Life Span” chapter says: “Let us live out our lives!” (LS16, 228). Life span is a matter of life force. Receiving boundless vitality from the Gohonzon, we can live vigorously to the end. This is the “Life Span” chapter’s secret teaching of rejuvenation.

**Saito:** Certainly, there are many people in the SGI who have extended their lives. I know of a woman who had once been sickly and weak, and who, prior to joining the Soka Gakkai, had been told by a physician that she would not live long. However, as a result of taking faith, she became healthy and is now, at more than 100 years of age, still vigorously participating in discussion meetings. Meanwhile, the doctor who told her this has long since passed away.

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**Ikeda:** Through faith, with each passing year our hearts become increasingly youthful. We advance vigorously and filled with a sense of boundless hope for the future. This is true health. This is true longevity.

Those who dedicate their lives to kosen-rufu can definitely achieve such a state. That is why we practice faith.

### A Message for People of the Future

**Endo:** Getting back to the outline of the “Life Span” chapter, we have gotten as far as the explanation that the Buddha enlightened since the remote past has been constantly dwelling in this world. Shakyamuni next clarifies that the Buddha will be constantly present in the world throughout the future, too. He says, “Originally I practiced the bodhisattva way, and the life span that I acquired then has yet to come to an end but will last twice the number of years that have already passed” (LS16, 227).<sup>17</sup>

**Saito:** This is a message to the future. From the standpoint of “saving living beings,” the true intention of the “Life Span” chapter lies not so much with the past as with the future. The Daishonin says that the “Life Span” chapter was expounded exclusively for the people in the world after Shakyamuni’s passing, and above all for the people of the Latter Day.

I believe the significance of its teaching about the past lies in the elucidation of the original cause of Shakyamuni’s enlightenment.

**Ikeda:** That may be so, but from another perspective, it is precisely because the “Life Span” chapter reveals the origin of the Buddha’s life (the cause) that it can lead the people of the future who are experiencing the sufferings of birth and death to enlightenment (the effect). It is the passage you just cited, “Originally I practiced the bodhisattva way,” that suggests this most fundamental of origins.

**Saito:** In other words, the “original cause of enlightenment” lies in Shakyamuni’s attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past. And when we pursue this original cause, we arrive at the Buddhist Law implicit in the sutra as was revealed by Nichiren Daishonin.

**Suda:** In “The Opening of the Eyes,” the Daishonin says, “The doctrine of *ichinen sanzen*, or three thousand realms in a single moment of life, is found in only one place, hidden in the depths of the *Juryo* [‘Life Span’] chapter of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra” (MW-2, 66 [80]). Over the years, various arguments have been made about precisely which passage of the “Life Span” chapter contains this teaching. Nichikan Shonin clearly states that it is contained in the passage, “Originally I practiced the bodhisattva way.”

**Ikeda:** That’s right. T’ien-t’ai expresses the marvelous state of life of the Buddha

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awakened to the eternity of life in terms of the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen*. And the soul of this doctrine lies in the “Life Span” chapter.

But the “Life Span” chapter reveals the eternity of life through the marvelous appearance that Shakyamuni assumes after attaining Buddha hood (i.e., the true effect). This is termed the “mystic principle of true effect.” But the real issue is what ordinary people can do to awaken to life’s eternity. It is Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism of the true cause that explains this. I expect that later on we will have the opportunity to delve into this point more deeply.

### **Toward the “Century of the Human Revolution”!**

**Suda:** Incidentally, if the Buddha eternally dwells in this world in both the present and the future and is never extinct, then the question arises of why the Buddha enters nirvana.

The Lotus Sutra explains: “If they [people] see that the Thus Come One is constantly in the world and never enters extinction, they will grow arrogant and selfish, or become discouraged and neglectful. They will fail to realize how difficult it is to encounter the Buddha and will not approach him with a respectful and reverent mind” (LS16, 227). Therefore, the Buddha explains that he enters extinction as an expedient means. This is the meaning of “as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana” (LS16, 229).

**Saito:** I expect we will have occasion to take up this point again later on. In a word, the “Life Span” chapter is the soul of all sutras. It is the “Life Span” chapter that provides answers to the questions: “What is Buddhism?” and “What does Buddhism teach?”

**Ikeda:** Yes. Nichiren Daishonin states, “If, among all the numerous sutras, this Juryo chapter should be lacking, it would be as though there were no sun and moon in the sky, no supreme ruler in the nation, no gems in the mountains and rivers, and no spirit in human beings” (MW-2, 128 [150]). To study the “Life Span” chapter is to study the very essence of Buddhism. It is to deepen one’s understanding of the essence of life and of the true nature of the self.

If we fail to understand this, then no matter what we might do our lives would be fundamentally shrouded in darkness. Our lives would be full of illusion and suffering. We would live in a world of darkness truly “as though there were no sun and moon in the sky.” It is the “Life Span” chapter that causes the “sun of hope” to rise in our lives. This process is called the human revolution.

**Suda:** I see.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, whom we talked about at the beginning, also writes:

If you want to heal the world it is terribly important to understand that you cannot heal the world without first healing thyself ... it is very important that you heal the world soon, before it is too late: you have to understand that you

cannot heal the world without healing yourself first.<sup>18</sup>

**Ikeda:** That's exactly right. To change the world, we first have to change ourselves. And the fundamental thing that we as members of the human community need to change is our view of existence, our view of life and death, our view of the self. The "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra offers fundamental guidelines concerning this issue of life and death.

Generally speaking, belief in something eternal makes people more humane. I think it was Kanzo Uchimura who said, "I think that nothing exalts a person more than having a sound view of the afterlife."<sup>19</sup>

It seems to me that if we suppose this lifetime to be the be-all and end-all of existence, then we cannot lead a truly profound life. Unless we understand the eternity of life, at bottom our lives will become transitory and uncertain.

It is like trying to swim in shallow water. In the summer, babies will play in a plastic swimming pool. For babies, that may be sufficient. But when people become elementary-school aged and know of the existence of real pools, they will no longer be satisfied with tiny plastic pools. Further, when they become aware of the joy of swimming in the ocean, even a large modern pool that makes artificial waves will prove unsatisfactory. The same is true in life. When we open our eyes to the "ocean of life" that stretches out within our being, we can lead an existence of great and profound fulfillment.

People are now increasingly paying attention to the issue of life and death, and focusing on the human being. This is a sign of the impending dawn of the twenty-first century. The "century of life" will be a "century of the human revolution." It will be a century when we see an unprecedented blossoming of civilization based on the principle of the eternity of life found in the "Life Span" chapter.

*To be continued*

1. *Susumu Oda, Seishinkai ga Akasu—Sei to Shi Kokoro no Shinso* (Life and Death, and the Heart's Inner Reaches Elucidated by a Psychiatrist) (Tokyo: Hamano Shuppan, 1997), pp. 44–58.
2. The following is excerpted from: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death Is of Vital Importance: On Life, Death and Life After Death*, ed. Göran Grip (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1995), pp. 56–60.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. Yoshida Shoin (1830–59): One of the most influential figures of the movement to establish the modern Japanese state. A scholar, teacher and writer, he and his followers played a key role in toppling the Tokugawa regime and ushering in the Meiji era.
5. *Ryukonroku* (Record of an Enduring Soul).
6. Alain: Pen name of Emile-Auguste Chartier (1868–1951).
7. *André Maurois, Memoirs* (1885–1967), trans. Denver Lindley (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 35.

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8. *Kenshiro Ohara, Sei to Shi no Kokoromoyo* (Patterns of the Heart in Life and Death) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1991), p. 100.
9. *Hiroomi Kawano, Gan no Ningengaku* (A Study of Humanism in the Face of Cancer) (Tokyo: Kobundo, 1984), pp. 290–291.
10. *Josei Toda, Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda) (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 174–75.
11. Daisaku Ikeda, *Ningen Kakumei* (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1967), vol. 3, p. 291.
12. Editor's note: All quotations from the Lotus Sutra are from: *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For purposes of convenience, all citations from this work will be given in the text and abbreviated as follows: LS followed by the chapter number, and then the page number.
13. *Ningen Kakumei*, *ibid.*, p. 106.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
15. Please refer to the discussion in the previous installment of this series.
16. *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1983), vol. 3, p. 415.
17. "...the number of years that have already passed": This refers to the period of *gohyaku-jintengo*.
18. *Death Is of Vital Importance*, *ibid.*, pp. 117–122.
19. *Kanzo Uchimura, Kirisutokyo Mondo* (Dialogue on Christianity) (Tokyo: Kado-kawa Bunko, 1905), p. 21.

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