

Untimely Death: Challenging the Doubt

IN January I received a message that a youth was killed in Oceanside, California. He was 16, and was an SGI-USA member, as is his mother. I was shocked at the news.

The boy was attacked by three teenagers his own age who wanted his skateboard. The incident received wide coverage by the local news. In this particular community, violence is uncommon, and the tragedy has raised awareness as to the senselessness of teenage violence.

The boy's funeral and memorial, held at the local community center, was well attended. He touched the lives of many people in the community, as well as in the SGI-USA organization. Despite the circumstances of the boy's death, the atmosphere of the service was hopeful and bright, reflecting Nichiren Daishonin's spirit of encouragement regarding the oneness of life and death. Because of this atmosphere, the boy's cousin felt inspired to begin practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism.

People naturally question why this would happen. Did he do something bad to deserve this? This prompts further questions: Will our loved ones attain enlightenment no matter how or when they die? How can we view such deaths?

I thought of my own mother's death from injuries sustained in a traffic accident. I was 25 at the time; she was 53. I introduced her to Buddhism immediately after I started practicing. We both had been chanting for three years when she died. I was living in Tokyo when my brother told me of her accident, so I traveled three hours by train to my home in Fuji. I cried and chanted the whole trip home. She had died by the time I arrived.

I was shocked. I had hoped that she would live a long and joyful life. Many doubts arose when my mother died so young and in a traffic accident. My brother, who does not practice, questioned why our mother died even though she was practicing this Buddhism.

Although my mother's life was not easy, she overcame many sufferings through faith. She struggled to raise six children after separating from my father, all the while challenging a strained relationship with her mother-in-law. However, so much had changed in three years that my grandmother also started to practice. Ironically, my mother had just picked up medicine for my grandmother and was returning home when she had the accident.

Every day I chanted for her happiness, determined to find the answers to these questions in my life. I realized that my mother completed her mission and that how long you live is not as important as the quality of your life. We don't know what kind of karma we've accumulated from the past. We can't make the judgment that a short life is necessarily miserable and a long one is happy. I believe she created a life of enjoyment in the three years that she practiced and challenged her karma, thereby surely attaining enlightenment.

This is verified by the Daishonin in "Lessening One's Karmic Retribution":

If one's heavy karma from the past is not expiated in this lifetime, he must

undergo the sufferings of hell in the future, but if he experiences extreme hardship in this life, the sufferings of hell will vanish instantly. When he dies, he will obtain the blessing of Rapture and Tranquillity, as well as those of the three vehicles and the supreme vehicle (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 17).

Although my mother died in an accident, the value of her life was in no way diminished; neither was the value of her practice. I want this point to be clear. Our practice negates past bad karma. She already has, or definitely will be born in good circumstances in her next life. In this I have absolute confidence.

Regardless of the form of death, whether due to sickness, old age or accidents, one definitely can attain enlightenment. Death is death. No matter what, we all must encounter it. It's quite natural that we would want to die a peaceful death, but we choose our karma in this respect based on the principle of "deliberately creating the appropriate karma."

Through the death of our loved ones, we have the opportunity to think more deeply about the issues of life and death and the greatness of the Daishonin's Buddhism. While it's only natural to grieve, we can view this suffering of death as a chance to strengthen our faith and practice, so as not to be overcome by our doubts. From the standpoint of eternity, we are certain to attain Buddhahood through the practice of sincere faith, as the following passage states:

While he [your husband] was in this world, he was a living Buddha, and now, he is a Buddha in death. His Buddhahood transcends both life and death. This is the meaning of the doctrine that is of utmost importance: attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 207)

President Ikeda encourages us that family and friends of the deceased will surely be reunited through faith. "People who are united by a profound spirit of faith, fellow members who are joined by powerful bonds of love and affection—[though temporarily separated by death]—the family members and kin of such people will in time definitely be reunited" (June 13, 1994, *Seikyo Times*, pp. 11–12).

Of course Buddhism recognizes the importance of living a long life. We should take care of our health and be careful not to cause accidents as much as possible. Developing a strong practice and a sense of mission for kosen-rufu will determine the value of our lives. "But it is better to live a single day with honor than to live one hundred and twenty and die in disgrace" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 238). Simply living a long life is not enough; rather, living joyfully and contributing to the happiness of others is what really matters.

Fred M. Zaitso
SGI-USA General Director