

Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra 31

This is the thirty-first 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 August 1997 issue of the Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai study journal.

This is the third part of their discussion on the doctrine of the Ten Worlds and their sixth on the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” (sixteenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Here they investigate the worlds of Heaven, or Rapture, and the two vehicles of Learning and Realization. They also take up such issues as how to elevate one’s state of life while living in a society filled with greed and selfishness, and the meaning of true fulfillment and joy.

31 The “Life Span” Chapter—The Six Paths to the Four Noble Worlds

Takanori Endo: Today let’s discuss the world of Heaven and the worlds that we’ve come to know as the two vehicles of Learning and Realization.

The word *heaven* evokes an image of a realm that is bathed in cheerful rosy hues. But I’m not sure what color I would associate with the worlds of Learning and Realization.

Daisaku Ikeda: How about gray?

Katsuji Saito: Yes, gray would be it. Such a realm, as I imagine it, would be rather dark and gloomy.

Haruo Suda: That’s probably because in the Gosho there are many descriptions of people of the two vehicles being severely reprimanded by Shakyamuni Buddha.

Endo: Still, the two vehicles, or two paths, are included among the four noble worlds.¹ That’s because those in these states have gone beyond endless transmigration through the six paths.² As a matter of fact, their state of life is really quite high. And, to that extent, they should be happier than those dwelling in the six paths.

Ikeda: Why, then, do you suppose the progression is from rosy to gray? Wouldn’t it be better to simply remain in the world of Heaven? I expect our discussion will hinge on this point.

Ultimately, there is certainly nothing wrong with the world of Heaven. Problems arise, however, when filled with self-satisfaction and complacency, we become attached to or are held back by this state of life.

It probably goes without saying that everyone desires the bliss of a heavenly existence—good health, abundance, a happy home, a joyful life—circumstances I hope and pray everyone will enjoy. Unfortunately, however, no rose can bloom forever. With the passing of time, its color is certain to fade and its petals to scatter

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as it experiences the four seasons or sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death that are an integral part of all life.

Saito: It has been said that as the joy of Heaven fades, its inhabitants experience the five types of decay.³ Buddhist texts use the image of flowers wilting to convey this.

Ikeda: The joy of Heaven is ephemeral like a mirage or a dream. A life spent in pursuit of a mirage is itself a mirage.

The purpose of Buddhist practice is to establish an eternally indestructible state of happiness; not a fleeting happiness that perishes like a flower, but an internal palace of happiness that will last throughout all time. This diamond palace, this treasure tower soaring to magnificent heights is built through faith.

Heavenly flowers of joy blossom within that palace according to the season. Because in this state we actualize the principle that earthly desires are enlightenment, the more worries we have, the greater the sense of fulfillment we feel. The true purpose of the four noble worlds lies in constructing such a “diamond-like heart.”

In other words, it is our human revolution—changing from someone who is buffeted about by the environment, to someone who can positively influence their surroundings—that enables us to construct an unshakable palace within. The seeking mind represented by the two vehicles could be said to constitute the foundation on which this eternal palace within is built.

Suda: Perhaps rather than the color gray, a more appropriate simile would be a subdued silver.

Endo: The state of the world today could be likened to a bubble that has burst. The ephemeral prosperity we have enjoyed has taken a heavy toll. When you think about it, any society that would encourage its people to play out their desires to the hilt does nothing but engender suffering. That is certainly the state of affairs in Japanese society today. I think it is also why Japan today so clearly illustrates the teaching about transmigration in the six paths.

Ikeda: That’s what is commonly called the devilish power of desire. What happiness has the pursuit of such desires brought?

If you can imagine a “heaven of desire” produced from having all of your desires fulfilled, you will find at its summit the Devil King of the Sixth Heaven. A life or a society devoted solely to the pursuit of desire is ruled by this devil king. No condition is more horrid and miserable.

Saito: It’s true that in modern civilization the unbridled pursuit of desires is generally regarded as something “good.” And that the goal of society is nothing more than to reach the world of Heaven. But the fact is, modern civilization has reached a deadlock. That should be clear to anyone.

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Ikeda: The fundamental cause for this deadlock is that people are focused entirely on the external, material world, and fail to direct their gaze within. Above all, they avert their eyes from the universal sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death that constitute the fundamental problems of human existence.

It is the Lotus Sutra, and particularly the “Life Span” (sixteenth) chapter, that can open people’s closed eyes. Only when we fix our gaze on grappling with questions of life and death do we awaken to the true meaning of existence. When we squarely face the profound reality of life and death, we realize how shallow are our concerns for momentary satisfaction. This is a very common experience.

The Brilliance of Life As Perceived From the Abyss of Death

He sees living beings seared and consumed by birth, old age, sickness and death, care and suffering, sees them undergo many kinds of pain because of the five desires and the desire for wealth and profit. Again, because of their greed and attachment and striving they undergo numerous pains in their present existence, and later they undergo the pain of being reborn in hell or as beasts or hungry spirits. Even if they are reborn in the heavenly realm or the realm of human beings, they undergo the pain of poverty and want, the pain of parting from loved ones, the pain of encountering those they detest—all these many different kinds of pain.

Yet living beings, drowned in the midst of all this, delight and amuse themselves, unaware, unknowing, without alarm or fear. They feel no sense of loathing and make no attempt to escape. In this burning house which is the threefold world, they race about to east and west, and though they encounter great pain, they are not distressed by it. (LS3, 59)⁴

Suda: To be able to look death in the eye can change the way we live, as many SGI members can attest. I would like to introduce the experience of Makoto Sato, who was head of the Soka Gakkai organization in Toyama Prefecture. In June 1979, Mr. Sato was diagnosed as having terminal cancer of the upper jaw. He transferred from a hospital in Toyama Prefecture to one in Tokyo. It was on that day that he learned the truth of his condition.

Saito: Did he hear it from the doctor?

Suda: No, Mr. Sato heard the news from his wife, who had been informed by the doctor a little earlier. She broke it to him as the two of them were strolling through the bustling Shinjuku district.

Endo: When he heard it, it must have come as quite a shock.

Suda: Mr. Sato had had some inkling as to the gravity of his condition, but still he was stunned. Yet, for some reason, he was not overcome with fear. On the contrary, he described how at the moment he heard the news, everything around

seemed to take on a kind of glow. The asphalt streets seemed to shine in the rays of sunlight that broke through the overcast skies of the rainy season. He thought that he had never seen the trees so green or the streets so lovely. He described feeling the urge to speak out to passersbys and embrace everyone.

Endo: That sounds remarkable.

Suda: At the same time, he said, he felt a shudder as though he were about to mount the gallows. But Mr. Sato did not run away from the reality of his life. With his entire being, he began waging an all-out struggle against the “devil of death.”

His surgery, which was supposed to last eight hours, took only two-and-a-half hours, and was highly successful. His teeth, gums and upper jaw were surgically removed, and the replacement of the gauze in his mouth every day caused him such excruciating pain that he almost fainted.

Still, he read the Gosho with his fading eyesight, engraving one passage after another in the depths of his life. After the operation, he was afraid that his speech would be impeded, but it turned out that talking was to be part of his rehabilitation. Mr. Sato remarked, “Speaking at Gakkai activities was the greatest aid to my recovery.”

Even in his circumstances, he was anxious about his fellow members of Toyama Prefecture. Since coming to the hospital in Tokyo, he had not had a single chance to return. Aware that he had not been back for some time, President Ikeda, you invited him to go on a guidance trip with you through Toyama and the Hokuriku region. When you arrived, the first thing you did was introduce him to everyone, saying, “I’ve brought Mr. Sato with me today.” I hear Mr. Sato was overcome with tears.

After that, Mr. Sato officially transferred to Tokyo, and began devoting himself in earnest to speaking at seminars, giving individual guidance and doing other activities in his new community west of Tokyo.

Ikeda: I met him many times at the Tachikawa Culture Center. I will always remember his spirited, animated gait. One could sense that he felt immense joy to be alive.

Suda: Mr. Sato himself once remarked: “Before experiencing what it is like to be on the very border between life and death, I could not understand the true profundity of the Buddhism or President Ikeda’s guidance. To live, Buddhism teaches, is a formidable struggle. But all too many people fail to realize this. I still have a lot of work that I need to do for kosen-rufu. Therefore, I cannot waste my time.”

Saito: For many people, certainly, it is only when death is staring them in the face that they ask themselves: “What has the purpose of my life been?” “Why didn’t I live and practice faith more earnestly while I was healthy?”

Ikeda: That's it exactly. Unless we practice faith with the attitude "now is the last moment of my life," we will have cause for regret. Unless we thoroughly exert ourselves for *kosen-rufu* while we are healthy and can take action, we will regret it for countless eons to come.

Suda: Mr. Sato died in 1992. But until his death, he put all his energy into giving individual guidance. Describing his attitude, he said, "When I meet someone, the thought that I may never have the chance to meet the person again in this life fills me with the ardent desire to teach the person as many Gosho passages as possible."

In particular, if he learned that someone was in the final stage of terminal cancer, Mr. Sato would encourage the person passionately as if it were his own affair. Those who received his encouragement and were revitalized have now fanned out throughout the entire country.

He would give people passages from Nichiren Daishonin's writings that he had copied onto memo stationary: "The fact that you have survived until now was in order that you might meet this opportunity" (MW-6, 235); "This illness of your husband's may be due to the Buddha's design" (MW-5, 280); "Life is limited, and we must not begrudge it" (MW-5, 132). Those receiving these pages often reported that while they had been familiar with the passages, when they received them in this form, individually hand-written, it struck a fresh chord in their hearts.

Saito: That's a wonderful account.

Ikeda: It illustrates what it means to live a truly noble life. When one gazes into the chasm between life and death, status, fame and wealth count for absolutely nothing. All that remains is one's bare self stripped of all external adornment. Only through Buddhism can we change our lives on this essential level.

Religion Is Born Out of Fear of "Heaven"

Ikeda: First of all, why don't we consider the basic meaning of "heaven"?

Endo: Okay. The term *heaven* is the translation of the Sanskrit term *deva*, a realm in which heavenly beings dwell. The same term is also translated as "deity." It originally means "shine," in the sense of radiating light.

Saito: Whether we call it "heaven" or "deity," when we think of it as the place where the Buddhist gods might dwell, that makes a lot of sense. The *deva* or the Buddhist gods, which include the god of the sun and god of the moon, must have been conceived as beings with a power transcending that of people on the earth.

Suda: In India, from ancient times it was believed that those who performed good acts in the present life would in future existences be reborn in heaven.

Endo: Brahman and Indra were representative Indian gods believed to dwell in the world of Heaven. These deities were in a sense adopted and given new

identities by Buddhism as Bonten and Taishaku, respectively.

Ikeda: “Heaven” or “deity” could be literally thought of not as a place, but as a universal force. People, gazing up at the skies, have always been captivated by the awesome grandeur of the heavens. And they have prayed to make the power of the universe their ally. Also, fearful of the destructive power that nature sometimes shows, they have prayed to avoid disaster.

People feared and worshipped the great power of nature. Sensing the existence of a destiny that they were powerless to change through their own efforts, they prayed to their gods for their lot to improve. From such prayer religion was born. Prayer was not born of religion; rather, religion was born of prayer. In other words, the concept of “heaven” suggests a perception on people’s part of a great existence transcending human beings.

Many animals live on four limbs with their eyes turned to the ground. Human beings stood up on their legs and directed their gaze out into the universe. They aspired toward “heaven.” Metaphorically speaking, I think we can characterize the evolutionary advance of human beings in these terms. In that sense, the shining “heavens” must have become a kind of ideal.

Suda: Certainly, many new thinkers who lived around the same time as Shakyamuni—for example, the six non-Buddhist teachers⁵—generally put forward the view that the purpose of practice was to gain rebirth in heaven.

Ikeda: In Buddhism, “heaven” is not seen as a place to which one goes after death, but rather as a state of life that we may experience from moment to moment. Also, Buddhism designates the life-conditions attained through the practices of the six non-Buddhist teachers as belonging to the world of Heaven.

Endo: You are referring to the six heavens of the world of desire (a realm swirling with desire), the eighteen heavens of the world of form (a realm in which one has overcome domination by desire, but is still bound by physical restrictions), and the four heavens of the world of formlessness (a realm in which one is still subject to spiritual restrictions). Together these make up the twenty-eight heavens.

Suda: The Lotus Sutra says of the threefold world of desire, form and formlessness, “There is no safety in the threefold world; it is like a burning house” (LS3, 69). Since the six paths are included within the threefold world, the two terms are identical in meaning.

Saito: Of these, the world of desire is a realm swirling with the desire to live, instinctive desire, material desire and desire for social advance.

The world of Heaven is primarily a state of rapturous joy experienced through the fulfillment of such desires. For example, when one is in a state of satisfaction after a good meal, he is in the world of Heaven.

Suda: Nichiren Daishonin says, “Joy is that [the world] of Rapture [or Heaven]” (MW-1, 52).

Ikeda: Different kinds of joy accompany the fulfillment of different desires. There is, for example, pure intellectual desire that transcends the desires of the “world of desire”; there is desire for beauty; and there is spiritual desire to attain a sublime state of life.

Endo: The pursuit and fulfillment of such lofty desires must be found in the worlds of form and formlessness.

Saito: This could be described as a state in which one seeks the truth and that desire is fulfilled. This is still within the world of Heaven.

Suda: How is that different from the life-condition of the two vehicles of Learning and Realization? In particular, it seems that the world of formlessness and the two vehicles are similar in that they both indicate conditions of spiritual attainment.

Two Different Views of Attainment

Ikeda: People of the two vehicles with their higher life-condition do not view the state of life they have attained as an absolute goal. They do not become attached to it.

While those in the world of formlessness view their state as a condition of final attainment, those in the worlds of Learning and Realization view their state as an “intermediate path” that they have taken in seeking to advance further toward the state of Buddhahood. They are not captive or shackled to what they have attained thus far. They perceive the principles of non-substantiality and dependent origination operating in all phenomena.

Suda: Viewing all things from the standpoint of dependent origination means viewing them as coming into being through a synergy of internal causes and external relations, and as mutually interdependent.

Saito: When a new cause or relation is involved, the situation immediately changes. Therefore, they perceive each and every thing as existing through the temporary interaction of internal causes and relations. This is termed the “temporary fusion of internal cause and relation.”

Ikeda: That’s certainly true of human beings. The features that we think of as constituting our “self” are really no more than a temporal aspect that we assume. No one can escape change. A healthy person will someday become sick and die. A young person, in what seems but an instant, becomes old.

We may ask ourselves, “Just who am I?” But the person we were ten years ago is not the same as the person we are today. There is no such thing as an “unchanging self.” Buddhism therefore teaches that we should discard attachment to the self.

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Suda: That's the doctrine of "selflessness."

Ikeda: Selflessness means being without self. This concept reflects the point of view that there is no fixed self that is eternally unchanging. Rather, there is continual change. This position views the self as essentially non-substantial, or empty.

Saito: But unenlightened beings, supposing the self to be unchanging, become attached to the self and to their possessions. In other words, they perceive all things as "substantial." This is the state of life of beings in the six paths.

Ikeda: The same is also true of people's attachment to wealth, status, fame and the like: nothing is more empty; they are as ephemeral as bubbles on the water. Yet, beings in the six paths become attached to them, and live under the illusion that such things will belong to them in perpetuity.

To sum things up, those in the six worlds perceive all phenomena as substantial. Those in the worlds of Learning and Realization perceive all phenomena as essentially empty; that is to say, in light of the truth of non-substantiality. Those in the world of Bodhisattva perceive phenomena as provisional; that is, in light of the truth of temporary existence. And those in the world of Buddhahood perceive phenomena in light of the truth of the Middle Way, which integrates the truths of non-substantiality and temporary existence. I expect that we will have the chance to discuss this later in greater detail.

Endo: To illustrate what is meant by the statement that those in the six paths perceive phenomena as substantial, a baseball pitcher who, while young, makes a name for himself for having a very powerful fastball, will gradually lose his strength as he ages. Nevertheless, the person will most likely continue to maintain an image of himself as always having the same strong fastball. Then years later, when he's much older, he pitches at a crucial moment what he imagines to be his usual fastball. But it isn't. It is a decidedly weak pitch that leads his team to defeat. This is something you see from time to time.

Ikeda: There are people who, even after they retire, are unable to shake their sense of themselves or their pride as, say, a manager, or as an employee of a leading company—all in all making such people rather difficult to get along with. It is not unusual in Japan to find people whose entire identity is so bound up with the company they work for that, after they retire, all that remains is an impoverished sense of identity. In many cases, such people cannot begin a new phase in life because they are unable to examine this self with clear eyes, leaving them frustrated and miserable.

People have the tendency to view not only themselves but others as well in such static terms. No matter how another person might have grown and changed, they tend to always see the person as he or she was in the past. It is the insight of the

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two vehicles, that is, the wisdom of the truth of non-substantiality, that refutes such a static view. The true enlightenment of the two vehicles lies in the perception that there is nothing at all in the world that does not undergo change; and that, as a result, it is incumbent upon one to forever strive to advance and improve.

Saito: So when people of the two vehicles suppose the state they have attained to be an end in itself and grow complacent, ironically they no longer can be said to belong to the two vehicles.

Ikeda: That's right. At that point, they revert to the six paths. This is similar to how once beings of the world of formlessness believe that they have arrived at the highest summit of the world of Heaven, they begin to descend.

Endo: I guess we had better not enjoy ourselves too much!

Suda: Nichiren Daishonin says in "The Opening of the Eyes":

The devout followers of the non-Buddhist teachings ... ascending to the worlds of form and formlessness, believe they have attained nirvana when they reach the highest level of heavens. But although they make their way upward bit by bit like an inchworm, they fall back from the heaven where there is neither thought nor no thought, and descend instead into the three evil paths. Not a single one succeeds in remaining on the level of heavens.... (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 63)⁶

Ikeda: Although they have carried out difficult practices, earnestly ascending step by step, in the end they fall down head over heels. Why do you suppose that is?

There are many different perspectives. But simply put, there is probably something unnatural or forced in the state of life that they have attained as a result of carrying out such arduous practices. And because it is forced, they are unable to long remain in that state. To illustrate, if someone who doesn't have much money manages to stay at a first-rate hotel by resorting to unreasonable measures, then even though the person may be able to enjoy fine living there for a time, eventually the truth will come out and he will have to return to his "shabby home." Using the same analogy, it could be said that the purpose of Buddhist practice, rather than being to check into a nice hotel, is to securely rebuild one's home. Through our practice we develop a self that is like a splendid palace. In order to do so, we must first understand the fundamental causes of our suffering—the places where the roof leaks, or where there are drafts—and fundamentally repair these areas, and so create a comfortable and "homey" state of life.

In other words, Buddhist practice lies in perceiving that the cause of suffering in life is none other than one's own illusions, and then struggling to transform the self so as to conquer these illusions. Those in the world of formlessness are people

who strive in their own way to change their state of life, but who lack the wisdom of the true “law of life.” For that reason, there is something unnatural or forced about their efforts. They stand up as straight as they can; but because they lack firm footing, they tumble down again to their former state.

Saito: The “law of life” enabling one to change the self into a “palace” is the Mystic Law.

Ikeda: That is indeed the conclusion we reach.

Suda: This is the meaning of the Daishonin’s statement to the effect that, without the Lotus Sutra, one could never escape from transmigration in the six paths (GZ, 418). It is through the Mystic Law that people of the two vehicles, too, are for the first time able to move beyond the six paths.

The “First Step” in the Birth of Buddhism

Ikeda: In any event, desires and pleasures are of many different kinds. Consequently, the states of life that accompany their fulfillment also differ widely. It can be said that the state of joy one experiences upon achieving a target to which one has dedicated one’s life is that of Heaven. For instance, a child may have the goal of achieving the best grades in the class, or of mastering a difficult physical challenge, such as the horizontal bar in gymnastics. Musicians in an orchestra may attain the state of Heaven through thoroughly polishing their musical sensitivity and skill, performing in wonderful harmony and attaining a high level of musical expertise.

Saito: While these are certainly on different levels, in a sense they are alike in that each is a kind of self-actualization.

Suda: To dedicate one’s life to achieving some target—we can say that this itself is a part of what it means to lead a humane existence.

Endo: Last time, we said that those in the world of Anger strive to “win over others,” while those in Humanity, Heaven and the four noble paths aim to “win over themselves.” It could be said that the world of Heaven is the effect produced through a tenacious struggle to win over the self.

Since it is a state of inner fulfillment reached in the course of achieving one’s own goals, the “life-space” is broader than that of the world of Humanity. Even so, those in this state have not transcended the six paths.

Ikeda: Let’s try to recapitulate what has been said thus far. In Shakyamuni’s time, attaining the state of Heaven was a widely held ideal. And this state was above all understood as signifying fulfillment of the “world of desire.”

Saito: Toward that end, adherents of traditional Brahmanism carried out various prayers and practices.

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Ikeda: In terms of secular desire, the palace where Shakyamuni grew up must have seemed to the people of the time as akin to a heavenly realm. But when he ventured from the gates of the palace, Shakyamuni saw people suffering from old age and sickness. He also saw a corpse. Confronted by the reality of the four sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death, Shakyamuni understood the emptiness of desire. In other words, he perceived that everything is subject to change. Thereupon, he renounced the “heavenly” lifestyle in which he had grown up, and embarked upon his religious quest.

At the time, there were new thinkers who aspired to attain a lofty state of life transcending secular desire. These were the six non-Buddhist teachers. It is said that after renouncing the world, Shakyamuni received instruction from two of these individuals. But at length he discerned that the teachings they espoused did not ultimately offer a solution to the sufferings of life and death.

Endo: The world of desire had proved to offer no solution. Nor did the worlds of form and formlessness.

Ikeda: “Where, then, does true human happiness lie?” From this inquiry, the great teaching that is Buddhism was born.

Suda: The birth of Buddhism, then, lay in Shakyamuni’s progression from the world of Heaven to the realm of the two vehicles.

Ikeda: Yes, in the transition from the six paths to the four noble paths.

Endo: Could the first step in that direction have been Shakyamuni’s perception of life’s impermanence, as indicated by the account of his early life? Nichiren Daishonin says, “The fact that all things in this world are transient is perfectly clear to us. Is this not because the worlds of the two vehicles are present in the world of Humanity?” (MW-1, 52–53).

Ikeda: As was true in Shakyamuni’s case, fixing one’s gaze on death is probably the first step to be taken in seeking the “eternal.”

We live in a civilization dedicated to the pursuit of desire, of attachment to the world of desire. For instance, people take it for granted these days that life ought to become increasingly comfortable and easy. And in the event that they are unable to lead a peaceful and easy existence, it is certainly not for wanting to do so.

Difficult as it may be for people today to imagine, there have in fact been times in which people sought not an easy life, but another kind of existence. Making this point, the late author and social critic Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) writes:

The first thing that strikes one about the discomfort in which our ancestors lived is that it was mainly voluntary.... Men could have made sofas and

smoking-room chairs, could have installed bathrooms and central heating and sanitary plumbing any time during the last three or four thousand years. And as a matter of fact, at certain periods they did indulge themselves in these comforts. Two thousand years before Christ, the inhabitants of Cnossos were familiar with sanitary plumbing. The Romans had invented an elaborate system of hot-air heating, and the bathing facilities in a smart Roman villa were luxurious and complete beyond the dreams of the modern man.... If the men of the Middle Ages and early modern epoch lived in filth and discomfort, it was not for any lack or ability to change their mode of life; it was because they chose to live in this way, because filth and discomfort fitted in with their principles and prejudices, political, moral, and religious....

One can never have something for nothing, and the achievement of comfort has been accompanied by a compensating loss of other equally, or perhaps more, valuable things....

The modern world seems to regard it [comfort] as an end in itself, an absolute good. One day, perhaps, the earth will have been turned into one vast feather-bed, with man's body dozing on top of it and his mind underneath, like Desdemona,⁷ smothered.⁸

Saito: I recall that Huxley's wife highly commended your activities,⁹ President Ikeda.

Suda: His point is that to simply seek an easy life kills the spirit.

Modern Society Tries to Conceal Death

Ikeda: In that connection, what is problematic about the world of Heaven is that it functions to conceal the reality of the four sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. Because the state of Heaven is accompanied by momentary joy, it has the propensity to cause one to divert one's eyes from the great problems lying at the heart of existence. In fact, it is often the case that the world of Hell is more effective in opening one's eyes to the reality of life and enabling one to quickly comprehend the path leading to the four noble worlds.

Suda: Certainly, those whose lives on the surface appear very happy may have considerable difficulty embracing faith.

Saito: Material abundance and spiritual joy are important. But the question is whether simply possessing such happiness is enough to enable one to overcome the sufferings of life and death. Sadly, the answer is "No."

Endo: A religious scholar once asserted that in creating a work of art, a master painter can attain a transcendent state in which he or she can sense the eternity of life. He said: "Attachment to life cannot disrupt the artist's frame of mind in such sublime state of life. Nor does fear of death occupy any quarter.... The problem of

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life and death melts away of its own.”¹⁰

This scholar himself was later diagnosed as having cancer, and was told that he had only six months to live. At that point, he later recounted, he was swept by feelings and emotions that he had never imagined.

Ikeda: That’s the case of Hideo Kishimoto.¹¹ It’s quite famous.

Endo: He writes:

I then understood the strength of my attachment to life. When one’s life is exposed to direct danger, how the heart seethes and rages! The entire body wages a desperate resistance, which extends to the cells at the very tips of one’s hands and feet.¹²

And so he began a ten-year struggle against illness.

At first, the only way I could find to help myself cope with the shock that I had cancer and sustain myself spiritually was by frantically throwing myself into my work. I pushed myself relentlessly like a wounded boar. By living vigorously and keeping busy with my work, with the sense of fulfillment it brought me, I tried to resist the fear of death that assailed me. The desire to live well—that was my sole source of sustenance. I thought that, insofar as possible, I would thereby try to distract myself from my fear of death.... But the more I tried to avoid thinking about the darkness of death, the larger the prospect of death, like a gaping portal, loomed before me.¹³

Dr. Kishimoto’s son relates that a year before his father died the latter was so busy that to talk with his father, he had to make an appointment two days in advance to get ten minutes of his time.

Several months before he died, Dr. Kishimoto wrote: “As a result of this cancer, a disease that I never thought I would contract, I was overwhelmed by the sense of hunger for life and I found myself standing before the implacable darkness of death.”¹⁴ He also said: “For the ten-year period during which I continued to battle the recurrence of cancer, I came to understand with my entire being the horror of this state of hunger.”¹⁵

Ikeda: A “hunger for life” that no amount of working or thinking can assuage—these are the sentiments of someone who has squarely faced the reality of his own death.

Suda: People are rarely able to muster the extraordinary courage to face death directly.

Ikeda: Dr. Kishimoto also offers insightful comments about various trappings of the modern age that, as he puts it, “try to conceal death.”

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Endo: That's right. One of these, according to Dr. Kishimoto, is an improved standard of living. Through hard work, we can attain lives of comfort and convenience, and enjoy an agreeable environment. With the advance of medical technology, the average life span has increased. As a result, he says, death has become further and further removed from the reality of people's daily lives.

Ikeda: In a broad sense, I think it could be said that such boons of civilization represent the aspect of Heaven in society. Dr. Kishimoto argues that such things that prompt one to avert one's eyes from death are deceptions that, while entirely free of malice, are at the same time the most dangerously misleading.

Endo: Yes. He suggests that modern civilization deceives people into believing that there is no need to come to terms with death.

Ikeda: But the roots of this "society of deception" are clearly in decay, and suffering people are on the increase. For instance, while each year in Japan approximately ten thousand people die in traffic accidents, twice that number annually commit suicide.

Also, there is a frightening degree of apathy or indifference about matters of life and death in our society. And it is only becoming more pronounced and widespread, not only in youth, but in the older generation as well. And we hear about many appalling incidents evidencing a cold-blooded apathy toward other human beings.

Saito: It seems to me that "death of the spirit" and "death of sensitivity" afflict growing numbers of people.

Ikeda: I have the feeling that it is becoming increasingly apparent that our modern civilization is paying the price for having paved over life's fundamental issues.

Conquering the Fear of Cancer's "Recurrence"

Endo: At the start of our discussion, the experience of Mr. Sato of Toyama was introduced. I keenly feel that "facing death" is much easier said than done. Probably it was because Mr. Sato had lived out his life in the Soka Gakkai that he was able to conclude his life so vigorously.

Saito: It is likely that no one else could understand the pain and shock people feel at the time they are told that they have cancer. There are many SGI members who have fought and overcome cancer through faith. In such a struggle, the encouragement of family members and friends becomes a great source of support.

Ikeda: Encouragement is very important; it is a source of untold strength. Probably there isn't anyone who could remain perfectly calm when faced with the

prospect of imminent death. Death makes anyone uneasy and anxious. It is frightening. That's normal and natural.

Someone who says, "I am not afraid of death" is usually simply striking a pose. On the other hand, if one cowers in fear at the prospect of death, then one cannot defeat the "demons" of illness and death. Only through faith can we truly overcome our fear of death.

But even if someone who is ill intends to chant daimoku, anxiety will often stand in their way. At such times, having someone who will pray together with them or offer heartfelt encouragement will go a long way toward alleviating their worries and filling them with courage.

Endo: That's really true. For someone who has had cancer, the greatest concern is that the cancer will recur. It seems that the shock people feel when they learn that their cancer has returned, is even greater than the shock they felt when learning for the first time of their condition.

Yoshinobu Matsuura of Toyohira Ward, Sapporo, whose experience has been introduced in the *Seikyo Shimbun* newspaper, was operated on for cancer of the liver. In just four months' time the cancer had recurred. At that time, he was reportedly frozen in shock. Even though he made struggling against the disease the focus of his life, he found that he simply could not muster the energy to chant daimoku. And the pessimistic sense that he had no chance of recovery grew only stronger.

It was the words of a senior in faith that finally aroused Mr. Matsuura's spirits: "If you take it easy like this, the cancer will also feel comfortable, and will be content to remain inside your body indefinitely. You should fight for kosen-rufu and thereby drive the cancer away!"

He understood then that he had been defeated by himself—by the weak part of his nature that had decided that his condition was incurable. In the end, he realized that by winning over himself, he would be able to defeat the "devil" of illness. From that point on, he reportedly began exerting himself in kosen-rufu activities like a new person.

Ikeda: He showed splendid victory. When we stand up to battle the devil of illness, we are winning over the self.

Endo: He had the attitude that with every daimoku he chanted, he was driving out the cancer cells. And he exerted himself with the same spirit in introducing other people to the Daishonin's Buddhism and promoting subscriptions to Gakkai publications. Each day he waged an earnest struggle, and was in the end able to realize a splendid recovery.

A Single Day of Life Is More Precious Than All the Treasures in the Universe

Ikeda: For someone who has once come to the brink of death, each day takes on immeasurable worth and importance. This is something that those who avoid facing death wholly fail to grasp. Nichiren Daishonin says, "One day of life is

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more valuable than all the treasures of the universe” (MW-1, 231). Therefore, it is important that we make the most of each and every day.

A Buddhist text says, “Each day we should earnestly set about accomplishing everything that we need to do that day, since for all we know our death may come tomorrow.”¹⁶

Saito: It is to live with the awareness that the present moment is the last moment of our lives, and, therefore, is infinitely valuable.

Ikeda: Life changes constantly, and flashes by in an instant. We should carefully reflect on these words of the Daishonin:

How long does a lifetime last? If one stops to consider, it is like a single night’s lodging at a wayside inn. Should one forget that fact and seek some measure of worldly fame and profit? Though you may gain them, they will be mere prosperity in a dream, a delight scarcely to be prized. You would do better simply to leave such matters to the karma formed in your previous existences.

Once you awaken to the uncertainty and transience of this world, you will find endless examples confronting your eyes and filling your ears. Vanished like clouds or rain, the people of past ages have left nothing but their names. Fading away like dew, drifting far off like smoke, our friends of today too disappear from sight. And should one suppose that he alone can somehow remain forever like the clouds over Mount Mikasa?¹⁷

The spring blossoms depart with the wind; the maple leaves turn red in the autumn showers. All are proof that no living being can stay for long in this world. Therefore, the Lotus Sutra counsels us: “Nothing in this world is firm or secure; all is like foam on the water or a wisp of flame.” (MW-5, 34–35)

Saito: This means that we must not become attached to the world of Heaven, which is as evanescent as foam on the water.

Ikeda: The Daishonin also states:

Outside the city of Tranquil Light, everywhere is a realm of suffering. Once you leave the haven of inherent enlightenment, what is there that can bring you joy? I pray you will embrace the Mystic Law, which guarantees that one “will enjoy peace and security in this life and good circumstances in the next.” This is the only glory that you need seek in your present lifetime, and is the action that will draw you toward Buddhahood in your next existence. Single-mindedly chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and urge others to do the same; that will remain as the only memory of your present life in this human world. (MW-5, 38)

Develop Inner Affluence

Ikeda: Those in the world of Heaven could be thought of, in the words of the Lotus Sutra, as “millionaires” who enjoy both material and spiritual abundance.

Nichiren Daishonin, citing the words of the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China, explains that there are three kinds of “millionaires.” These are the “secular millionaires,” “world-renouncing millionaires” and “mind-observing millionaires.”

I will not go into a detailed explanation here, but “secular millionaires” could be thought of as millionaires who dwell in the world of Heaven. For example, they may be people of outstanding character, great wealth, or tremendous knowledge. “World-renouncing millionaires” means millionaires of Buddhism—Buddhas. Their lives are endowed with all manner of benefit and good fortune. “Mind-observing millionaires” are ordinary people who realize that, just as they are, they can become such Buddhas.

Endo: In other words, those who uphold and practice to the “true object of worship” or the Gohonzon, receive all the immeasurable practices and benefits of Buddhas.

Ikeda: Our aim is to become “mind-observing millionaires” whose lives shine over the three existences of past, present and future; individuals who observe their own minds and perceive the world of Buddhahood, which is an inexhaustible ocean of good fortune. In other words, we are millionaires in the depth of our lives through the power of the Lotus Sutra.

Suda: I think that this points to the fundamental path for transcending the deadlock at which the present “society of desire” has arrived.

Ikeda: Next time we will be discussing the worlds of Bodhisattva and Buddhahood. I propose that we base our discussion on the doctrine of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds.

Saito: We are at long last going to embark on an essential journey in pursuit of the doctrine of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, which is the *sine qua non* of the Lotus Sutra.

(To be continued)

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