

**Study Material for November • December**  
**“The Ultimate Teaching Affirmed by All Buddhas**  
**of Past, Present and Future”**

*The following passage is taken from the book Learning From the Gosho: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, pp. 178–89, and can also be found in the Gosho Zenshu, pp. 563–64.*

**Life Transcends Birth and Death**

WHAT, ultimately, is Buddhism? The Buddhist canon encompasses an immense number of scriptures, known as the eighty-four thousand teachings. And then there are also countless commentaries. Trying unaided to come to terms with such a monumental body of material is like journeying through a vast jungle without a map.

However, Nichiren Daishonin clearly states, “The eighty-four thousand teachings are the diary of one’s own life” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 563). The Buddhist sutras, in other words, are a record, a diary, of one’s life. “They are about you,” he is saying. “There is nothing at all in the sutras that does not pertain to your life.”

**To conceive of life and death as separate realities is to be caught in the illusion of birth and death. It is deluded and inverted thinking.**

**When we examine the nature of life with perfect enlightenment [the true enlightenment of one awakened from the dream of illusions], we find that there is no beginning marking birth and, therefore, no end signifying death. Doesn’t life as thus conceived already transcend birth and death?**

**Life cannot be consumed by the fire at the end of the kalpa, nor can it be washed away by floods. It can be neither cut by swords nor pierced by arrows.**

**Although it can fit inside a mustard seed, the seed does not expand, nor does life contract. And although it fills the vastness of space, space is not too wide, nor is life too small. (GZ, p. 563)<sup>1</sup>**

Death is an issue of the greatest importance for all people without exception. No one can honestly say that death is of no concern. At the same time, however, few important issues are given so little serious consideration. It is said that there are two things people cannot gaze at directly: the sun and death.

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62) decried people’s tendency to avoid thinking of their own mortality: “This negligence in a matter where they themselves, their eternity, their all are at stake, fills me more with irritation than pity; it astounds and appalls me.”<sup>2</sup> His dismay at people’s irrational indifference toward death drove him to use such strong words.

What is death? What becomes of us after we die? Failing to pursue these questions is like spending our student years without ever considering what to do after graduating. Without coming to terms with death, we cannot establish a

strong direction in life. Pursuing this issue brings real stability and depth to our lives.

Many views of life and death have been articulated over the ages by religious leaders, philosophers and scientists. Without going into a detailed discussion, I think it's fair to say that human knowledge has not advanced sufficiently to either definitively affirm or deny the possibility of life after death. Science takes as its object of investigation phenomena discerned with the five senses; what happens after death is beyond its purview. Its basic stance disqualifies it from speaking on the matter one way or the other.

No view of the nature of existence can offer direct proof of what happens after death. It seems, therefore, that rather than trying to compare the relative merits of different views, it is far more fruitful to ask how a particular view influences people's lives in the present—whether it makes them strong or weak, happy or miserable.

Buddhism teaches that life is eternal. It encourages us to use this existence to thoroughly polish the eternal entity of our lives. Eternal happiness, it explains, lies precisely in making such efforts.

With the view that life continues eternally over past, present and future, accomplishing human revolution becomes the ultimate purpose. When we polish and revolutionize our lives, then life is joyful—and death is joyful, too. We will also experience happiness in our future lives. What else can we call eternal?

In a letter to his follower Shijo Kingo, Nichiren Daishonin says, "No matter how dearly you may cherish your estate, when you die, it will only fall into the hands of others" (MW-3, 238). You should not jealously cling to your possessions, the Daishonin says. All too often, people fail to fully come to terms with their mortality and as a result become attached to things that ultimately have no worth.

In his *Essays*, the French Renaissance philosopher Montaigne (1533–92) introduces the following episode about a king of ancient Greece who was planning to conquer Italy:

When King Pyrrhus [of Epirus, 319–272 B.C.E.] was undertaking his expedition into Italy, Cyneas, his wise counselor, wanting to make him feel the vanity of his ambition, asked him: "Well, Sire, to what purpose are you setting up this great enterprise?" "To make myself master of Italy," he immediately replied. "And then," continued Cyneas, "when that is done?" "I shall pass over into Gaul and Spain," said the other. "And after that?" "I shall go and subdue Africa; and finally, when I have brought the world under my subjugation, I shall rest and live content and at my ease."... Cyneas then retorted, "Tell me what keeps you from being in that condition right now, if that is what you want. Why don't you settle down at this very moment in the state you say you aspire to, and spare yourself all the intervening toil and risks?"<sup>3</sup>

The source of this anecdote is Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. Pascal and others in later ages have cited it.

The point is that people find contemplating their lives and facing mortality so

distasteful that they instead look for one thing after another in which to absorb themselves. Thus avoiding the essential point of polishing their lives, they arrive finally at death without having prepared in the least for that moment. The King Pyrrhus anecdote teaches the folly of such a life.

Tolstoy wrote:

Death is more certain than the morrow, than night following day, than winter following summer. Why is it then that we prepare for the night and for the winter time, but do not prepare for death. We must prepare for death. But there is only one way to prepare for death—and that is to live well.<sup>4</sup>

“To live well” means to develop, cultivate and elevate our lives. Socrates called this “attending to one’s soul.” His famous words to the effect that “philosophy is practice for dying” carry the same meaning.

In the Goshō we are studying this time, Nichiren Daishonin teaches that the eternal entity of our lives cannot be burned by fire, corroded by water or destroyed by weapons. The eternal entity can both fuse with the universe in all its vastness and take the minuscule form of a mustard seed. It truly exists in the perfectly free state of nonsubstantiality (Jpn *ku*).

Buddhism teaches how we can gain firm control over the function and power of the free, unimpeded aspect of life—the power of the Mystic Law. This is the teaching that a single life-moment possesses three thousand realms. Herein lies the ultimate meaning of faith.

We possess within us an indestructible life force equal in power to the universe. When we tap this life force, there are no sufferings or worries that we cannot overcome.

### What Is True Transcendental Power?

**People, confused by their minds, fail to understand and awaken to the true nature of their lives. The Buddha is awakened to and manifests the wondrous workings of life, which he has called “transcendental.” By transcendental he means “in command of all laws of life, unobstructed by anything.” This free transcendental power exists in the lives of all sentient beings. Therefore, foxes, raccoon dogs<sup>5</sup> and the like can manifest their respective transcendental powers. This is the [expression of] their relative enlightenment.**

**It is from this single entity of life that the differences among lands arise. (GZ, p. 563)**

True transcendental power is not along the lines of so-called supernatural abilities. It is actually the ability to help others become happy. Nichiren Daishonin says, “Aside from the attainment of Buddhahood, there is no ‘secret’ and no ‘transcendental power’” (GZ, p. 753).

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Manifesting true transcendental power means thoroughly polishing the eternal essence of our lives, elevating ourselves toward the state of Buddhahood. By so doing, we can realize eternal happiness and develop our state of life to where we can help others become happy, too.

Even if supernatural abilities enabled people to fly, the ability to fly would not make us happy. For that matter, to fly all we need to do is get on an airplane.

As the Daishonin indicates where he says, “It is from this single entity of life that the differences among lands arise,” society and even the land change depending on the state of life of people living there. The power to change even the environment exists in the heart.

A great human revolution in the life of one person can change the destiny of humankind and the planet. It is Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra, that encourages and enables people to become aware of this great power, to draw it forth and use it. Buddhism gives people the means to develop themselves thoroughly and opens their eyes to the limitless power inherent in their lives.

Through training hard, an athlete can bring out hidden strengths and abilities to the maximum. Similarly, the extent to which we can manifest our latent power, the true essence of our lives, depends on our practice. The requisite discipline is Buddhist practice—it is faith. With the view that life exists eternally over past, present and future, establishing solid faith becomes the fundamental concern. We should make establishing solid faith our main purpose in this existence.

The Daishonin says: “Explaining the wonder of life is the prime objective of all the sutras. One who is awakened to the workings of the mind is called a Thus Come One” (GZ, p. 564). Buddhism reveals the “wonder of life” from a wide variety of angles. Attaining Buddhahood is the same as gaining a full understanding of this wonder.

### The Buddha Fully Grasps the Wonder of Life

**Explaining the wonder of life is the prime objective of all the sutras [that Shakyamuni preached], termed the eighty-four thousand teachings. These doctrines all exist in one’s life. Accordingly, the eighty-four thousand teachings are the diary of one’s life.**

**We hold and embrace the eighty-four thousand teachings in our lives. To suppose that the Buddha, the Law and the pure land of Eagle Peak exist apart from one’s life and to seek them outside is a delusion. (GZ, pp. 563–64)**

The Buddhist sutras, again, are said to number eighty-four thousand. This is because human beings supposedly have eighty-four thousand earthly desires; the sutras explain the means for overcoming these.

The sutras are a record of the Buddha’s life. But the Daishonin also says, “The example of one person represents the impartial truth inherent in all human beings” (GZ, p. 564). The sutras are a diary of each person’s life. Whether we can

believe this, whether we can remember this, depends entirely on us.

Buddhism was expounded for each of us. By fully comprehending the wonder of life, we gain complete, total freedom. We have no sufferings we cannot overcome, no prayers that are not answered. We gain all the good fortune and enter the journey of eternal life in which living is a joy and dying is joyful, too.

Happiness does not exist outside us. It is found within, in our own state of life.

Yet modern civilization continually draws our gaze outward. Ours is a civilization, it is said, that has forgotten death—death has become an anathema. People try to get by without thinking about or coming into contact with it. But does ignoring death enrich life?

While science can push back the moment of death, it cannot stop it. Death is a condition of human life—no one can escape it. A civilization that has forgotten death, therefore, has forgotten human beings. And a civilization that has forgotten human beings will not bring people happiness.

Tolstoy says: “An enlightened man is he who knows why he lives and what he ought to do. Do not try to be either learned or educated, but strive to become enlightened.”<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, aren't the lives of SGI members, who strive to cultivate themselves and serve others based on the eternity of life, enlightened?

There are countless dramas of life and death in the SGI. I have heard of one person who, after expressing gratitude for the SGI, said, “I'll be back soon” and then passed away. Another person, smiling gently, closed her eyes, saying, “I'll be born right away and return to the garden of kosen-rufu.” Someone else died after bravely relating his dream—to undertake great activities in his next life—while listening to such favorite Soka Gakkai tunes as “Song of Comrades” and “The Song of the Human Revolution.” Aren't these enlightened people who have awakened to the eternity of life and met death with complete composure?

A civilization that revolves around cultivating life respects human dignity and excellence. It is a society that treasures people of wisdom.

In modern society, where highest value tends to be placed on material wealth and utility, people are often judged on whether they are “useful.” As a result, the elderly and the sick tend to be marginalized. A civilization that does not squarely face death also deserts people in sickness and old age. For the rapidly graying populations of many countries, this spells a bleak future.

This would not be the case in a civilization that treasures human maturity and depth of wisdom. If there is value in the young shoots of spring and the light of summer, then there must also be value in the mature trees of autumn and the grand sunsets of winter.

This is all the more so for those who practice Buddhism. For us, old age is a time of unsurpassed fulfillment when we put the finishing touches on the “golden journal” of our lives and attain Buddhahood; days of mission when we show actual proof and relate to others the wonder of life and power of the spirit we have experienced. This lifetime is precious and irreplaceable.

As a young man, the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) was arrested for revolutionary activities and sentenced to die. He was taken to the

execution grounds and, along with his friends, tied to a stake. Guns were pointed at them.

The thought that in a few moments he would no longer be in this world stirred a powerful reaction in the young Dostoevsky. A character from one of his novels in a similar situation thinks to himself:

What if I were not to die! What if I could go back to life —what eternity!  
And it would all be mine! I would turn every minute into an age; I would lose nothing, I would count every minute as it passed, I would not waste one!<sup>7</sup>

At the last moment the execution was canceled, but the episode left its imprint on Dostoevsky's entire life. His experience might have been extreme, but if we think about things objectively, everyone, differences in length of life notwithstanding, is certain to die. From that standpoint, each of us is a "prisoner on death row."

Incidentally, I understand that efforts are being made to educate people on the subject of death. One example of this is having people imagine that they have only three months to live, encouraging them to think how they would spend that time. This kind of exercise prompts people to think earnestly about what they need to accomplish.

Tolstoy observed:

If a man knows that he will die inside of thirty minutes, he will not do anything trifling or foolish in these last thirty minutes, surely not anything evil. But is the half century or so that separates you from death essentially different from a half hour?<sup>8</sup>

Use your time wisely and polish your life. When I was young, my health was so poor that I might have died at any time. Therefore, I threw myself into efforts for Buddhism with the determination to use each moment to the fullest.

We have to work hard. We have to develop ourselves. As the Daishonin says, "Arouse deep faith and polish your mirror night and day" (MW-1, 5). That is the fundamental objective of life and the conclusion of "The Ultimate Teaching Affirmed by All Buddhas of Past, Present and Future." Daily, we carry out this practice, the essence of Buddhism—this is the same as mastering the eighty-four thousand teachings.

Let us live aware of the fantastic wonder of life, with the realization that each day is a priceless treasure. □

1. "Sanze Shobutsu Sokanmon Kyoso Hairyu" (*Gosho Zenshu*, pp. 558–75), written in October 1279 when the Daishonin was 58.
2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 156–57.

3. Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 196.
4. Leo Tolstoy, *The Pathway of Life*, trans. Archibald J. Wolfe (New York: International Book Publishing Company, 1919), part 2, p. 179.
5. Raccoon dogs: A small, raccoon-like, burrowing dog of Asia, called Tanuki in Japan, having long, loose fur and a short, thick tail. In Japan foxes and raccoon dogs were thought to possess supernatural powers, which they used to trick or deceive people.
6. Tolstoy, *The Pathway of Life*, part 1, p. 296.
7. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), p. 57.
8. Tolstoy, *The Pathway of Life*, part 2, p. 32.

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