

**Prepare for Death by Living Well**  
**When Betsy Bell Ringer confronted her fear of death, she learned to love life.**

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**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. (“The Ultimate Teaching Affirmed by All Buddhas of Past, Present and Future,” *Gosho Zenshu*, p. 563)**

*I am alone. I don't remember how old I am, but I'm still a child, and I'm thinking about dying and how there's nothing I can do to escape it. I will have to die and nothing can erase the abject terror I feel. I have no one with whom to talk. I want to cry but don't.*

*As years pass, this scene is repeated. It never gets better. It's stark, and its reality renders me powerless with fear. I think about God and Jesus and the promise to be with them. It doesn't help, because thinking that way leads me to wonder if I can go to God with all the anger and hatred I feel toward people I'm supposed to love. I am a bad person.*

Good person or bad, time moved on. I married, had kids, divorced and went back to college for a bachelor's degree. It was the '60s, and college was a swinging place to encounter new ways of thinking, but nothing eased my fear of death.

Then one day I heard a song on my favorite rock station. I think it was called “The Tree of Life,” and one line opened my mind to a new perspective: “The fear of death is the fear of life.” Man, did that make sense or what? I could SEE this in the people around me. The ones who were happy, bold, straightforward and vital didn't seem too concerned about death. The timid, sneaky, passive/aggressive folks were scared of everything.

Amid the demonstrations, riots, tear gas and police and civilian brutality of Berkeley in the '60s, I became totally disillusioned with the Christian church and began looking elsewhere for a sense of spirituality. I read Alan Watts. I explored the Hebraic Kabbalah. Nothing resonated. All I had for sure was my gut instinct.

And then a friend introduced me to Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. From the beginning, I felt a strong connection. I had some remarkable experiences, but most important to me were the answers I received each time I asked one of the questions considered unanswerable in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It didn't happen overnight, but gradually I lost my fears. I discovered what has become my favorite Gosho, “Happiness in This Life,” especially the paragraph beginning “Just chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and when you drink sake, stay home with your wife” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 162). There was something so comforting about that sentence!

Joining the Sophia Group, the women's division study group, fueled my desire to study, and I realized that, somewhere along the way, not only had my fears evaporated, they had been replaced with a sense of joy, even anticipation, for my life. I discovered passages like the following:

“[A]fter death, a thousand Buddhas will extend their arms and enfold us in their embrace” (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 3, p. 550).

“First study death; then study other matters” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1404).

“Avoidance of the issue [of death] is actually at the root of today's pervasive obsession with personal advantage, vanity and pleasure” (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 55).

And in *Learning From the Gosho*, SGI President Ikeda quotes French philosopher Blaise

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Pascal:

“This negligence in a matter where [people] themselves, their eternity, their all are at stake fills me more with irritation than pity; it astounds and appalls me” (p. 179).

In the same book, President Ikeda writes:

“[R]ather 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.... [W]hen we polish and revolutionize our lives, then life is joyful — and death is joyful, too” (p. 180).

In another quote, this time from Tolstoy, President Ikeda directs us once again:

“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” (p. 182).

Who knew that Pascal and Tolstoy were Buddhists? And we, who live in the Latter Day of the Law, who are fighting against the delusions being perpetrated by the temple, have access to one of the most brilliant minds of our time, President Ikeda — a man who can cull the wisdom of ancient philosophers and current thinkers to show us clearly and definitely that life is to be lived to the fullest and death is nothing to fear.

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