DIALOGUE ON THE LOTUS SUTRA
36 THE "LIFE SPAN" CHAPTER—LIFE AFTER DEATH—ETERNALLY ADVANCING WITH GREAT LIFE FORCE: THE MEANING OF ETERNAL LIFE

The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra—
A Discussion on Religion in the Twenty-first Century

This is the thirty-sixth installment of an ongoing discussion on the Lotus Sutra between SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and Vice Chiefs Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. It appeared in the January 1998 issue of The Daibyakurenge*, the Soka Gakkai study journal.*

With this installment the participants continue their investigation into the meaning of eternal life as they explore the significance of death, and life and death in the world of Buddhahood.

36 The "Life Span" Chapter—Life after Death—Eternally Advancing with Great Life Force: The Meaning of Eternal Life

DAISAKU IKEDA: Let's continue to explore eternal life. I hope that in this lifetime, we can prove this principle beyond any shadow of a doubt!

TAKANORI ENDO: There recently appeared in Japan a rather unusual book titled *The Truth About the Dead: The World of English Epitaphs* (*Shisha no Honne: Eikoku Bohimei no Sekai*). The author discusses numerous epitaphs on the gravestones in British cemeteries.

KATSUJI SAITO: Could you give some examples?

ENDO: Well, one epitaph for instance reads, "Here lies my wife. / Here let her lie! / Now she's at rest / And so am I."[1] (laughter)

IKEDA: What brutal honesty!

HARUO SUDA: From the sound of it, she must have been quite hard on him!

ENDO: There are also epitaphs expressing a wife's feelings of bitterness at having been preceded in death by her husband. "To follow you I'm not content. / How do I know which way you went?"[2]

SAITO: She's saying, "I don't know whether you've gone to heaven or hell." That's very blunt.

IKEDA: Just because people are married doesn't guarantee that they will be together in the afterlife. The fact remains that we are born alone and we have to die alone. It's harsh, but true.

Buddhism, however, teaches that through the power of the Mystic Law we can be born along with our loved ones in lifetime after lifetime, over eternity.

SUDA: Surely there are also many epitaphs expressing endearing sentiments.

ENDO: Yes, of course.

IKEDA: What kind of epitaph is most common?

ENDO: I don't know the exact statistics, but according to the book, the following is typical of many of the epitaphs found on English graves over the last more than two hundred years: "As I was so are you and as I am so shall you be."[3]

SAITO: That's quite philosophical. It says to the person viewing the headstone: "Someday you too will be dead."

ENDO: Along the same general lines, another epitaph reads: "Don't stare, / Pass me by.

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/ You'll soon lie here, / Same as I."[4]

Nothing Is As Certain As Death

SUDA: That epitaph is really a *memento mori*, a reminder of mortality. It calls to mind the oft-cited passage in the "Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life" where the Daishonin urges us to exert ourselves in faith "with the profound insight that now is the last moment" of our life (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 22). It would make more sense to me if he said "… with the *determination* that now is the last moment of our life." What is the significance of the words "profound insight"?

IKEDA: That's a very important point. Everyone knows that they will die "sometime." But we tend to imagine that death is always still a long way off, an event that will occur in the indefinite future. That young people should think this way is only to be expected, but the same is true of those getting on in years. In fact, people's tendency to ignore death's imminence may actually increase with age.

What is the true aspect of life? The reality is that a person may be alive one moment and dead the next. The possibility of death—from earthquakes, accidents, sudden illness or other causes—exists at all times. People simply forget this.

SAITO: That's very true. Even if one should flee to the ends of the earth or the furthest reaches of the universe, death cannot be avoided.

IKEDA: Someone once described the approach of death, saying, "Death who is not in front of us, but comes up on us from behind." Years and years can slip by while you say to yourself, "I'll start practicing in earnest someday," or "I'll work harder once I get through my present difficulties." Then, finally, it dawns on you that you will have to face death without having accumulated any real fortune in your life. I don't think this is an uncommon human experience. However, once you realize what has happened, though you may wish you had done differently, it is too late to do anything about it.

SUDA: Certainly, if you were told that you would be dead in three days, you wouldn't be able to just sit around idly watching TV.

IKEDA: But if you really think about it, whether it's three days or three years or three decades, the issue is essentially the same. The only way, then, is to live in the present—so that no matter when we might die, we will have no regrets.

Also, from the standpoint of eternity, even a hundred years is but an instant. It is literally the case that "now is the last moment" of our lives. Soka Gakkai second president Josei Toda used to say, "In truth, we practice faith for the time of our death."

SUDA: I see.

IKEDA: If we're looking for certainty, nothing is more certain than death. Therefore, the important thing is that right now, without hesitation, we do our best to accumulate "treasures of the heart" that will endure eternally.

Most people, however, live out their lives putting off this most important issue of all, spending their time in pursuit of momentary pleasure. Nothing is more important in life than the issue of life and death itself. Everything else is of little consequence by comparison. We will absolutely understand this at the time of death.

Someone who works as a caregiver to the terminally ill commented: "At the end of life, it's as if all at once your entire existence comes back to you in a vast panorama. At that point, it's not superficial matters like whether you were a company president or how much success you achieved in business that take precedence, but how you lived, how you

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regarded others. Did you show them love and kindness, or did you treat them with contempt? You feel a sense of satisfaction for having maintained your convictions, or know the pain and regret of having betrayed them. It is these human aspects of our lives that confront us all at once and with intensity as we face death. That is death's true nature."

SAITO: What that person refers to as "the human aspects of our lives" can be viewed in light of the doctrine of the Ten Worlds as our fundamental or underlying life tendency. Hearing such accounts really drives home the need for all of us to strive wholeheartedly to elevate our basic life tendencies.

IKEDA: In that sense, having an awareness and understanding of death actually raises our life condition. For it is when we are cognizant of the reality and inevitability of death that we begin to earnestly seek "something eternal," and determine to make the most valuable use of each moment of life.

ENDO: It's like having a deadline for a manuscript you are writing. It can be stressful, but the fact of the matter is that without a deadline it's really hard to get it done; I at least would probably never get around to writing anything.

SUDA: The same could be said for exams. As far as Buddhist study goes, if there were no exams, then it would be easy to let time slip by without making any progress, thinking all the while, "I'll get around to studying eventually."

IKEDA: What would happen if there was no death? Presumably life would just go on and on, and might even become boring.

SAITO: Without any sense of pressure or urgency, people would probably just while away their time.

ENDO: We'd have a serious problem with over-population!

SUDA: Even if you were three hundred years old and totally infirm, you could not die. The first Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti (259–210 B.C.E.) of the Chin dynasty is said to have sought an elixir of eternal youth and immortality. Under such circumstances, however, people might begin actively seeking an "elixir of death."

Looking Toward the Eternal

IKEDA: Because we know we are going to die, we strive to make the most of the present. Modern civilization has been described as a "civilization that has forgotten death." And it's no coincidence that it has at the same time become a civilization of unbridled greed.

Just as with any individual, when a society or civilization tries to avoid the fundamental issue of death, its people become decadent, seeking only immediate gratification.

It is awareness of death that distinguishes people from animals, and that in fact makes us human. This point has been made in many scholarly writings, such as Edgar Morin's *L'homme et la mort* (Man and Death [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970]). To ignore death is to lead a shallow, animalistic existence.

SAITO: This means that for both the individual and humankind as a whole, death is not something to dread or think of negatively; rather, it has a positive value in that it prompts us to search for "something eternal."

IKEDA: That's right. This is part of what is signified by the important doctrine of the "Life Span" (sixteenth) chapter indicated by the line, "as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana" (LS16, 229).[5]

SUDA: Simply put, "As an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana" means that

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death is an expedient or a means.

ENDO: Yes. It is a means for causing people to seek the eternal Buddha.

IKEDA: The Buddha, out of compassion, uses even his death as a means to lead his disciples to enlightenment. We should probably reconfirm this point from the standpoint of the text of the sutra.

SAITO: Yes, in the "Life Span" chapter, Shakyamuni explains that although his life is in fact infinite, through the power of expedient means he appears to enter nirvana in order to lead people to enlightenment. The rationale, here, is that if the Buddha were to continue to abide in the world indefinitely, then people would cease to seek out his teaching.

ENDO: One passage of the sutra reads:

> **If the Buddha remains in the world for a long time, those persons with shallow virtue will fail to plant good roots but, living in poverty and lowliness, will become attached to the five desires and be caught in the net of deluded thoughts and imaginings. If they 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)**

SUDA: I think in my case this is definitely true!

ENDO: Even a person with strong faith would probably grow lazy, thinking, "In the end the Buddha will somehow lend me a hand."

The Parable of the Excellent Physician and His Sick Children

IKEDA: The significance of the passage, "as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana" will probably become more clear if we view it in terms of the parable of the excellent physician and his sick children.

ENDO: To summarize the parable: There is an excellent physician who has many children. While the physician is away on a journey, the children drink poison. When he returns, he finds them in great suffering. And so he prepares "highly effective medicine" to cure them.

SUDA: The excellent physician represents the Buddha, and the children represent the people. The highly effective medicine corresponds to the Lotus Sutra and to the "eternal Mystic Law," which is also the teacher of Shakyamuni. In the Latter Day of the Law, it is the Gohonzon.

ENDO: Although their father has given them the best medicine, some of the children, because the poison has "penetrated deeply," do not drink it.

Those who take the medicine are immediately restored to health. But nothing can be done for those who refuse it, and they continue to writhe in agony.

IKEDA: These children represent "befuddled" people. They are called "befuddled" because, even though they are sick and desire to be cured, they refuse to take the medicine. The poison has penetrated so deeply that they have lost their ability to reason. They refuse the great beneficial medicine because they think it will taste bad. The "Life Span" chapter says that their "minds no longer function as before" (LS16, 228). They cannot think ration-

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ally. This is the state the Lotus Sutra is describing when it states "their heads will split into seven pieces" (LS26, 310).

SAITO: Broadly speaking, it seems to me that most people today are "befuddled." While many talk about how society is ill and something must be done to rectify the situation, when it comes to the issue of fundamental change in people's lives—which offers the only genuine cure for society's problems—they do not pursue this path in earnest. Confining themselves to abstract arguments or superficial approaches, they make no effort to understand the principle of human revolution. As a result, nothing really changes.

IKEDA: That's probably a fair statement. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the first Soka Gakkai president, was very strict in his stance toward such social ills.

SUDA: He concluded that human society was afflicted by what he termed "symptoms of higher psychosis."

ENDO: Taking pity on such "befuddled" people, the excellent physician, representing the Buddha, causes them to think that he has died in order to show them the way.

SUDA: After setting out again, he dispatches a messenger with instructions to tell the children that their father has died in a distant land. When they hear this, the children are filled with grief and sadness, and agonize at the thought that they now have no one they can depend on. It is then that they finally open their eyes.

"That's right!" they think, "We have the medicine that our father left behind for us." They decide to drink it and are immediately cured. When the father receives word that his children are all well, he immediately comes back and appears before them.

That is the substance of the parable.

Single-mindedly Seeking the Teacher

IKEDA: When we have access to something all the time, then, no matter how lofty and sublime it may be, we tend to forget our sense of appreciation. It isn't until we lose it that we begin to truly appreciate how important it was and the extent to which it had benefited us.

SAITO: When the children hear of their father's death, the sutra says, "All harbor thoughts of yearning and in their minds thirst to gaze at me [the Buddha]." It further describes them as "single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha, not hesitating even if it costs them their lives" (LS16, 230). In response to this "single-minded" seeking spirit, the eternal Buddha appears before them.

IKEDA: That's another way of saying that they awaken to the eternal world of Buddhahood within their own lives. And single-mindedly seeking the Buddha is the key to this awakening.

Nichiren Daishonin says that he manifested the world of Buddhahood in his own heart and became enlightened to the Three Great Secret Laws through reading with his life the passage, "single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha, not hesitating even if it costs them their lives" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 205).

As we have noted before, regarding the term "single-mindedly," the Daishonin remarks, "'Single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha' also means to see the Buddha in one's own mind, to concentrate one's mind on seeing the Buddha, and that to see one's own mind is to see the Buddha" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 205). In other words, the mind of an ordinary person who seeks the Buddha becomes the mind of the Buddha itself.

The heart is what really matters. One simply cannot understand Buddhism without a

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pure seeking spirit stemming from the depths of one's heart. When we practice with the awareness that we might only encounter the Gohonzon once in a hundred million or ten billion years, a profound sense of appreciation fills our heart each time we perform gongyo.

Nichiren Daishonin, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, manifested the world of Buddhahood in his own heart through living the passage "single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha, not hesitating even if it costs them their lives." We should deeply reflect on what this means.

The only way for us to attain Buddhahood is to manifest a spirit of utter selfless devotion, of "not hesitating even if it costs us our lives." Without this spirit, there can be no Buddhism. To arouse such a spirit in people, the Buddha leaves this existence. This is what is meant by "as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana."

What Is the "Moment of Death"?

IKEDA: President Toda once remarked: "Whose 'last moment' do you suppose the line 'now is the last moment of this life' refers to? It's the last moment of the Buddha's life. How forlorn we would feel if the Buddha ceased to exist. We should summon resolute faith and practice with the sense that we now have to part with the Buddha."[6]

After President Toda died, those who had not listened carefully to these words were filled with regret, wishing that they had done more while he was still alive.

"Now is the last moment of this life" is an exhortation to struggle intensely for kosen-rufu with the thought that now is the last moment of the mentor's life. It is a truly fortunate thing to work for kosen-rufu together with and supported by a mentor. Someone who doesn't understand this point cannot be called a true disciple.

Those who realize this and devote themselves in earnest while the mentor is alive correspond to the children in the parable who have not lost their senses. Those who fail to realize this correspond to the children in whom the poison has penetrated deeply.

SAITO: I see now that I hadn't fully grasped the significance of this parable. The principle of mentor and disciple is indeed the very soul of the "Life Span" chapter.

IKEDA: The "Life Span" chapter is the crystallization of the Buddha's immense compassion to try to teach us about the oneness of mentor and disciple. The mentor is the Buddha enlightened since the remote past. The disciples, made up of all people, are also Buddhas from the remote past. How can people be made to realize this?—that is the Buddha's constant thought as expressed in the chapter's closing lines, *Mai ji sa ze nen.*[7]

There is no such thing as a mentor who does not wish for his disciples to become truly outstanding in their own right. However, it is difficult for the disciples to grasp the mentor's spirit. No matter how much a parent is concerned about a child, the child rarely shares the same degree of concern for the parent. They become one only when they share mutual concern.

President Toda's spirit of concern for Mr. Makiguchi was truly awesome. Though strong and bold as a lion, near the end of his life when his long years of exertion had finally taken their toll, Mr. Toda would often say, "Without President Makiguchi I feel lonely. I would really like to return to his side." Whenever his thoughts turned to President Makiguchi, Mr. Toda exuded an air of the greatest solemnity. And when he talked about his mentor's death in prison, he would burn with intense indignation. He would sometimes shed bitter tears from the depths of his heart, and other times lash out in anger. He constantly reminisced and spoke about his mentor.

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I believe it was when President Toda learned from one of his interrogators in prison of Mr. Makiguchi's death that he determined to wage a relentless struggle throughout his life against the devilish nature of power that had driven his mentor to his death.

In that sense, we can say that President Makiguchi's death in prison functioned as the "expedient means" that set the stage for the kosen-rufu movement in the postwar era. It could not by any means have been possible without the single-minded seeking spirit of the disciple for the mentor.

Myo (or Mystic) corresponds to death and *ho* (or Law) to life. The mentor corresponds to death and the disciple to life. Mentor and disciple are themselves the Mystic Law; and the Mystic Law is itself life and death. This is truly the oneness of life and death and the oneness of mentor and disciple.

President Toda composed a poem:

My mentor has left this world
making the offering
of Bodhisattva Medicine King.
Left behind,
what offering can I make
for the Buddha?

He is saying that since his mentor had the spirit of "single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha, not hesitating even if it cost him his life," he, too, would live with this spirit. This is the spirit of the "Life Span" chapter. Without this continuity of mentor and disciple, discussion of "eternal life" would be little more than abstract theory.

Another important point in the "Life Span" chapter is that the mentor appears differently depending on the state of life of the disciple. It explains that disciples understand the greatness of the mentor only to the extent that they themselves grow.

The Meaning of the Jigage: The "Self" Is the "Eternal Buddha"

ENDO: The passage "as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana" probably reflects the situation at the time when Shakyamuni died. His disciples, bewildered at the loss of their great mentor, were probably thrown into utter confusion, not knowing where they would turn for support as they lived out their lives.

SUDA: According to a sutra, they were so afraid that "their hair stood on end." It describes the scene, saying that disciples "tear their hair and weep, and stretch forth their arms and weep, fall prostrate on the ground, and roll to and fro."[8]

SAITO: I think the adherents of Buddhism in later generations must have also felt a profound sense of loss at the fact that Shakyamuni was no longer in the world. In that context, the passage "as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana" taught that one must not become attached to Shakyamuni's outward "life and death." It urged them to open their eyes to the eternal life of the Buddha that transcends this dimension.

IKEDA: That's right. Moreover, when we awaken to the eternal and boundless life of the Buddha, we simultaneously realize that the Buddha's life constitutes the foundation of our own life. This is the "dawn" of our life.

Therefore, the *jigage* [verse] section of the "Life Span" chapter begins with the character *ji*, meaning "one," and ends with the character *shin*, meaning "self." In other words, the

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jigage section in its entirety is concerned with elucidating the enlightened self that is totally free of all impediments.

SUDA: The *jigage* is the essence of the "Life Span" chapter, and the "Life Span" chapter is the soul of all Buddhism. The call to open one's eyes to the greater self is therefore the quintessential message of Buddhism.

ENDO: The "Life Span" chapter says, "The Thus Come One perceives the true aspect of the threefold world exactly as it is. There is no ebb and flow of birth and death, and there is no existing in this world and later entering extinction" (LS16, 226). In summary, this means that there is neither "life" nor "death."

IKEDA: But in reality there is both "life" and "death." So why does it say this?

ENDO: I imagine that it's because the Lotus Sutra seeks to direct people's attention toward something that transcends the appearance of life and death.

SAITO: That seems correct. The Great Teacher Dengyo of Japan says "The two distinct phenomena of life and death are mystic functions of the one mind."[9] I think that the purpose of Buddhism is to awaken us to this "one mind."

IKEDA: That sounds true enough. But when we awaken to this "one mind," or the universal life of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we understand that "life" is the life of the Mystic Law, and "death" is the death of the Mystic Law. Therefore, saying there is no life and death is meaningless, and actually asserting so is an escapist approach, representing a kind of illusory attachment.

The Eternally Unchanging Entity of Life

SUDA: Yes. The Daishonin says:

> Regarding life and death with abhorrence and trying to separate oneself from them is delusion, or partial enlightenment. To clearly perceive life and death as the essence of eternal life is realization, or total enlightenment. Now Nichiren and his disciples who chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo awaken to the ebb and flow of birth and death as the innate workings of life that is eternal. (GZ, 754)

IKEDA: This is the correct Buddhist view of life and death. In the case of the Buddhism of Shakyamuni, it could be said that the teaching so encourages people to seek the "eternal great life" of the Buddha that it creates the tendency to try to avoid actual life and death.

When we practice the Daishonin's Buddhism, however, we can experience the "eternally unchanging entity of life" and actualize the principle that "the sufferings of life and death are nirvana" based on this eternal great life.

SAITO: It seems that in the West, many people have the image of Buddhism as a teaching aimed at attaining a "nirvana of tranquillity," a state in which there is neither life nor death.

SUDA: That is the way of thinking of the Hinayana teachings, which promote an image of nirvana as a "state free of the transmigration of life and death."

IKEDA: But the "Life Span" chapter rejects this view, explaining that such a "nirvana" is nothing more than an expedient means for pointing people in the right direction. Its strong point, nonetheless, is that it still emphasizes a realm that transcends life and death.

By contrast, the Daishonin's Buddhism teaches that we can quickly awaken to the "eter-

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nally unchanging entity of life."

Both Life and Death Are the Buddha

IKEDA: What, then, does it mean to experience life and death based on the cosmic Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo? The Daishonin says, "We repeat the cycle of birth and death secure upon the ground of our intrinsically enlightened nature." (GZ, 724). He is talking about a state of life of absolute freedom that exists eternally over past, present and future.

"Birth and death secure upon the ground of our intrinsically enlightened nature" means undergoing life and death based on the supreme life of the Mystic Law. When we embrace the Gohonzon, we can advance with our lives rooted in the "great earth of Buddhahood," which is at one with the life of the universe.

Undergoing the cycle of life and death in the nine worlds means awkwardly navigating one's way through difficulties and hardships. It is like veering along a path strewn with potholes; sometimes we fall in and are unable to get back on track; sometimes we have accidents and get injured.

On the other hand, experiencing life and death in the world of Buddhahood is like driving along on a smooth highway in a high-performance car; while enjoying the brilliant scenery around us, we take action with infinite life force to help others become happy.

ENDO: We are traveling through life and death with the world of Buddhahood as our foundation.

In Japan, many people believe that you become a Buddha only after death. But that's off the mark.

SUDA: The Daishonin says to one of his followers, "While he 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).

SAITO: This truly signifies the oneness of life and death.

IKEDA: We therefore have to be victorious in our present lifetime. Victory in this life translates into victory after death, in future lives, and over eternity. President Toda said, "If we can become happy in this life, then we will definitely be happy in our future lives, too."

ENDO: There are religions that teach that happiness only comes with death, without even attempting to offer people solutions to misfortunes and trials in this life. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, however, teaches that actual proof of happiness in this life is itself actual proof of happiness after death and in lives to come.

IKEDA: Eternal life is not something we can verify with our eyes; nor can it be proven empirically. In that sense, it belongs to the realm of belief rather than to the ordinary world of knowledge. This means that anyone can fabricate stores about the afterlife.

SUDA: It seems to me there are many religions that do just that.

IKEDA: The Daishonin's Buddhism is different in that it teaches the inseparability of life and death, indicating that we can see the state of one's afterlife in the state of his or her present life.

If we could not become happy in the present through practicing this Buddhism, we would have a hard time believing in promises of happiness after death. On the other hand, experiencing actual proof of happiness in this life gives us complete confidence that we will also enjoy happiness in the next. If the Daishonin's teaching about happiness over eternity was in fact mistaken, then it stands to reason we couldn't receive immeasurable benefit

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in the present life through its practice.

SAITO: That seems indisputable.

IKEDA: What about life and death based on the world of Buddhahood? What happens to a person who dies having maintained faith in the Mystic Law? Why don't we begin by seeing what the Daishonin says about this?

ENDO: In one place he says, "Were he to go right now to Eagle Peak, he would feel as delighted as if the sun had come out and illuminated all the ten directions; and he would find himself rejoicing, wondering how an early death could be so happy a thing" (MW-5, 281).

SUDA: That's a remarkable passage. There's not even the tiniest speck of doubt. He is saying that death, rather than being something to fear, is something we might even look forward to.

SAITO: The Daishonin also says:

> When you climb the mountain of wondrous enlightenment and gaze around you in all directions, then to your amazement you will see that the entire universe is the land of Tranquil Light. The ground will be of lapis lazuli, and the eight paths will be set apart by golden ropes. Four kinds of flowers will fall from the heavens, and music will resound in the air. All Buddhas and bodhisattvas will be present in complete joy, caressed by the breezes of eternity, happiness, true self and purity. The time is fast approaching when we too will count ourselves among their number. (MW-3, 216–17)

IKEDA: It's a state of being where "life is joyful, and death is joyful, too."

The Daishonin also says, "Because he has the wings of the single vehicle to rely upon, he can soar into the sky of Tranquil Light" (MW-7, 173). With eternity and the entire universe as the venue of our activity, we soar gracefully into the "great sky of happiness." Therefore, it is not death that we need to fear, but the strict law of cause and effect.

A person who lives well also dies well, and will be reborn well. A person who lives badly, dies badly, and will be reborn badly. The ancient Greek philosopher Antisthenes poses the question, "What is the best thing you can do as a human being?" His answer: "Die well."

The Spirit of the "Life Span" Chapter Is to Live Out Our Lives Based on the Mystic Law

SUDA: *Juryo*, in the title of the chapter, "Nyorai Juryo-hon" (Life Span of the Thus Come One), means to measure or fathom the life and wonderful virtues of the Buddha.

As we learned in our first discussion on the "Life Span" chapter, to practice the "Life Span" chapter is to live our lives filled with the great life force of the Buddha.

ENDO: I guess this means that longevity is important.

IKEDA: Someone once said, "Longevity is the art of life." To live long is itself a kind of victory. A passage in the chapter says, "Let us live out our lives!" (LS16, 228) Every day, morning and evening, I pray that all SGI members will enjoy excellent health and long lives.

At the same time, our success or failure in living based on the world of Buddhahood is not determined simply by our life-span in years. Nichiren Daishonin was only 60 at the time of his death.

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In Japan, someone who is sixty years old is said to have "completed one round of the calendar," because on the lunar calendar it marks the completion of five twelve-year cycles. This suggests that a person who reaches this age has lived completely.

Nikko Shonin, the Daishonin's successor, died at 88.

SAITO: At that time, especially, he would have been extremely long-lived.

IKEDA: At nearly 90, he was hale and hearty, reportedly attesting that his ears and eyes were as sharp and clear as ever. He took to bed early in February of 1333, and died in the middle of the night on the seventh. Accounts describe how to the very last moment he never suffered from senility or illness.

Nichimoku, the third high priest, died at 74 while on a journey to urge the imperial court to accept the Daishonin's teaching.

ENDO: He passed away at a place called Tarui in Mino province, which is part of what is now Gifu Prefecture.

IKEDA: The circumstances of his death reflect his total dedication to the Law. Rather than peacefully living out his natural span of years, he died engaging in a fierce struggle to uphold and spread his mentor's teaching.

SUDA: Nichimoku's death in the middle of a journey must have come as quite a surprise to all.

IKEDA: I think the fact that each of the three teachers[10] died in such a different manner is quite significant; although each of them embodied the eternal life of the Buddha achieved by one who thoroughly dedicates oneself in the struggle for kosen-rufu, the circumstances surrounding their deaths vary greatly. I believe there is profound meaning in this.

SAITO: The Daishonin says, "She [Toki Jonin's mother] departed on her journey to the Yellow Spring to reveal the principle of birth and death" (GZ, 977). The Daishonin teaches that life and death take many forms.

IKEDA: The Daishonin's Buddhism is flawless. It comprehends all aspects of life and is entirely free of contradiction. If, for instance, it expounded an ideal age for people to live to, then not reaching the desired age would cause unhappiness and suffering.

SAITO: President Toda died at 58. He cannot be said to have lived long. And President Makiguchi was 73 when he died in prison. Had he not been subjected to the harsh conditions of prison life, he would have surely lived longer.

IKEDA: However long you may live and whatever the place and circumstances of your death, if you have steadfastly dedicated yourself to kosen-rufu, then you are certain to experience life and death based on the world of Buddhahood.

From a young age, I was told that with my frail health I would not live past 30. But I have lived long and vigorously in President Toda's stead. Mr. Toda once told me, "You'll become the Takayama Chogyu of the Mystic Law.[11] The real Chogyu died at 31. You have to live on. You have to live on as my successor." Another time he went so far as to say he would "give his life" to me so that I could carry on. Now I have reached 70, and I am healthy. I believe I still have many good years ahead of me.

ENDO: It seems to me that this is truly the essence of the "Life Span" chapter.

IKEDA: Longevity itself is a treasure. But how you live is more important still. The Daishonin says, "It is better to live a single day with honor than to live to one hundred and twenty and die in disgrace" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 238).

SUDA: We find similar statements even in early Buddhist texts. One passage reads, "Better than a hundred years not seeing one's own immortality is one single day of life if

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one sees one's own immortality."[12]

SAITO: *Immortality*, here, means the state of life in which one has awakened to the eternal life of the Buddha.

SUDA: Yes. The same text contains the following description: "Watchfulness is the path of immortality: unwatchfulness is the path of death. Those who are watchful never die: those who do not watch are already as dead."[13]

Immortality Through Efforts for Kosen-rufu

IKEDA: For us, to be ever "watchful," to dedicate our life and work to actualize the great wish of kosen-rufu, is to attain a state of "immortality." This is what it means to read the "Life Span" chapter with one's life. We become one with the "eternal Buddha," the "Thus Come One," only through making continuous efforts for kosen-rufu. Then the infinite life of the Thus Come One manifests through our own finite life. This was certainly true of President Toda. Even when he was sick in bed, if someone raised a question relating to Buddhism, he would prop himself up and provide an answer. "No matter how bad a mood I may be in," he would often say, "being asked a question about the Daishonin's teachings always cheers me up." And this was his attitude until the very last moment of his life.

There was a certain chapter leader who, by struggling very hard, had gone from being a poor laborer to a successful businessman. On the day before we were to set out for the historic March 16 pilgrimage [in 1958], President Toda called up the man on the telephone. After explaining that he would be gone for a few days, President Toda, despite his very weak condition, proceeded to energetically and politely instruct the man for thirty minutes on how to conduct his business.

Several days later, the man called President Toda at the head temple to tell him how things were going. At the time, Mr. Toda was severely ill. Even so, as soon as he heard that the chapter chief was on the line wishing to speak with him, he asked for the phone. Then, leaning on the person next to him for support and having someone else hold the receiver for him, he talked to the chapter leader. He was truly a remarkable teacher.

SAITO: I understand that President Toda had a premonition of his own death. According to the notes of his attendant, the year before he died, Mr. Toda remarked, "I should have died long ago. I'm trying to see just how long I can go in this life.… Here's the truth: I will die in April of next year. Yes, I will die."

I cannot begin to comprehend President Toda's state of life. But I am moved to hear accounts of how to the very end of his days, having awakened to life's eternity, Mr. Toda always treated people with the most profound compassion.

IKEDA: When we grasp the eternity of life, compassionate action naturally wells forth. Otherwise our understanding is not genuine.

Those who perceive that all people's lives are the same as the Buddha's life will freely expend their own lives to convey that understanding to others. Whether we call it the Buddha's state of life or enlightenment, only in such concrete action can we envision what it means to be enlightened. The same was certainly true of President Makiguchi.

The following is the experience of a woman who had only just taken faith. She was trying sincerely to introduce other people to the Daishonin's teaching. One day she brought a friend who was worried about the illness of a parent with her to see Mr. Makiguchi. President Makiguchi advised her, "To enable your parent to take faith is an act of the highest filial devotion." The friend immediately decided to practice.

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The woman joined her friend in earnestly chanting daimoku, and half a year later the friend's parent passed away with a truly beautiful and peaceful look. The friend was glad to have done everything she could for her parent's eternal happiness.

Next the woman introduced her friend's younger brother to the practice. But the very night that the brother decided to take faith he was killed in an accident. The woman, shaken by this turn of events, lost no time coming to see President Makiguchi at his home. She asked him, "Why did he die so suddenly after deciding to take faith?"

Although it was late at night, out of concern for the woman's friend, Mr. Makiguchi said, "Let's go see her together," and they set out. As soon as they arrived, he suggested that they all chant daimoku together earnestly. With him leading, they continued chanting for a long time. Some people who were not members joined in the chanting, and later they reportedly also joined the Soka Gakkai.

Questions of life and death cannot be addressed by pat answers or simple logic. It is by really expending our life and mustering the utmost sincerity that we can open and revive the hardened hearts of people overwhelmed with grief and sorrow. It is through such conduct that we can show actual proof of the teaching that "*Myo* means to revive, that is, to return to life" (MW-3, 23).

SAITO: I see.

For the benefit of our readers, I would like to talk a little about the death of the twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan. I receive many questions about Nichikan. It seems that many members want to learn more about him, as they are praying daily before the Gohonzon that he transcribed.

IKEDA: Leaders should always give immediate responses to the questions that are on people's minds. Let's take that up right now.

Nichikan's Last Moments

ENDO: There's a famous episode concerning Nichikan's final moments that involves Japanese *soba*, or buckwheat noodles. He died in the early morning hours of August 19, 1726. He was 62.

It seems that Nichikan knew that death was upon him. A day or two before, he dressed in his robes and emerged from his sickbed. Boarding a litter, he went around the temple grounds to make his farewells. First he recited the sutra and chanted daimoku at the main temple. Then he went to pay homage at the graves of the three teachers in the cemetery. He then went around to see the former high priest and the new high priest. Passing through the commercial area at the foot of the temple, he returned to the Dai-bo lodging complex. It is said that the path was lined with well-wishers.

SUDA: As soon as he was back in his quarters, he had workers begin preparations for the funeral, and he personally wrote a few lines of verse on the lid of what would be his coffin.

SAITO: He was completely self-composed.

SUDA: Late in the night on the eighteenth day of that month, he had those around him enshrine a Gohonzon nearby and instructed them about chanting daimoku when he died and about other matters. He then asked them to prepare some buckwheat noodles, which was a favorite dish of his.

Consuming the noodles in seven mouthfuls, he smiled brightly and remarked, "It's magnificent—the Palace of Tranquil Light." He then rinsed his mouth and held his hands

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together in prayer facing the Gohonzon. Around 8:00 A.M. on the morning of the nineteenth, he passed away peacefully, with his eyes and mouth slightly opened.

SAITO: The fact that there are such detailed records probably shows just how moved people were.

IKEDA: He ate the noodles in order to fulfill a promise he had made. About half a year before his death, he remarked, "Upon his death, the great translator and scholar Kumarajiva said, 'After my death, if my tongue does not burn, you will know that all that I have said is true.' And, indeed, his tongue was not consumed in flames. Likewise, since I have always been fond of buckwheat noodles, at the time of my death I think I will eat buckwheat noodles, give a big smile and chant daimoku. If this is indeed how it turns out, then you must not doubt a single word that I have spoken."

ENDO: And his final moments were indeed just as he had said.

IKEDA: Also two months before his death, in June of that same year, Nichikan remarked: "Taiseki-ji is now flourishing. The number of people chanting daimoku is increasing. The three powerful enemies are therefore sure to arise. Since this past spring I have been praying to dispel calamity. Therefore the Buddhas and heavenly deities in response have assumed the form of…the devil of illness that has afflicted me personally. Since this is certainly the principle of 'lessening karmic retribution,' there is no need to be saddened by it in the least."

ENDO: It was around that year that the Kanazawa persecution[14] came to a head.

Reborn in the Time and Place We Desire

IKEDA: He had the dauntless attitude of a leader of kosen-rufu. I think that Nichikan could retain such calm and dignity in the face of death because of his profound sense of responsibility.

At any rate, to experience birth and death from the standpoint of the world of Buddhahood means that death is something we absolutely need not fear. It's the same as going to sleep one day and waking up the next. Just when you think you are dead, before you know it, you've entered your next existence!

SUDA: I feel much better now!

IKEDA: Moreover, we are born in the place, and at the time and in the form that we desire. And this is not limited to this world. If you've grown tired of Earth, you can go and work on some other planet!

The Daishonin speaks of attaining the "mysterious power of perfect freedom of action" through faith in the Mystic Law (MW-7, 69). And in the "Sanze Shobutsu Sokanmon Kyoso Hairyu" (On the Ultimate Teaching Affirmed by All Buddhas throughout the Three Existences), he says that those who embrace the Mystic Law will be reborn "in the space of a moment."

ENDO: Yes. The passage reads:

> Reaching the supreme land of Tranquil Light unimpeded, in the space of a moment one will return to the midst of the dream of birth and death in the nine worlds. One's body pervades the Dharma World in the ten directions and one's mind enters the lives of all sentient beings. Impelled from within and drawn from without, in the harmony of [internal] cause and [external] relation, one freely exercises the transcendental power of compassion and widely brings benefit to living beings without any impedi-

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ment. (GZ, 574)

SAITO: This is what is meant by life and death based on the world of Buddhahood.

ENDO: Some people probably would much rather take a break than be reborn right away!

IKEDA: They should definitely rest then! To rest after a life of hard exertion is only natural. Death is rest. It is a time when, embraced in the healing sea of the universal life, we recharge our worn-out lives, and prepare for the explosion of vitality that is birth.

At the same time, when we base ourselves on the world of Buddhahood, compassion becomes the very foundation of our lives. Therefore, we want to be born again quickly so we can help more people become happy.

The expression "in the space of a moment" is better thought of in terms of "life-time" as opposed to "physical time." Just as the sufferings of Hell for even a brief time can seem like an eternity, time passes quickly when one is experiencing the great joy of the world of Buddhahood. "In the space of a moment" refers then to experiential time.

A Warning to Modern Society

SAITO: This will conclude our discussion of the "Life Span" chapter. There are still many points that we could discuss, but now let's turn to the remaining chapters, beginning with the "Distinctions in Benefits" (seventeenth) chapter.

IKEDA: Here I would like to comment on the passage from "The Opening of the Eyes" that reads, "If one fails to become acquainted with the Buddha of the *Juryo* chapter, one is no more than a talented animal who does not even know what lands his father presides over" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 131).

While this passage can be interpreted in various ways, I think it is a warning to people of the modern age who are confused about the foundation of their own lives.

In summation, the "Life Span" chapter seeks to change "talented animals" into "genuine human beings" who are awakened to the Law of life. The sun of the true "century of the human being" will rise when people learn and put into practice the spirit of the "Life Span" chapter, the great philosophy of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

Kosen-rufu is a magnificent movement to create a society in which all fields of endeavor—economics and politics, education and science, industry and agriculture, the home and life itself—are illuminated by the brilliant light of the Mystic Law.

To be continued
Illustrations by Blair Thornley

1. Motohiro Umemori, *Eikoku Bohimei no Sekai* (Tokyo: Shufunotomosha, 1997), p. 21. This Japanese book includes original English epitaphs.
2. Ibid., p. 6.
3. Ibid., p. 161.
4. Ibid., p. 162.
5. Editor's note: All quotations from the Lotus Sutra are from: *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For purpose 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.

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6. From the April 1960 edition of *The Daibyakurenge*, the Soka Gakkai study journal.
7. "At all times I think to myself: / How can I cause living beings / to gain entry into the unsurpassed way / and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?" (LS16, 232).
8. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, part 2, trans. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995), p. 178–79.
9. "Tendai Hokkeshu Gozuhomon Yosan," cf. *Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1543.
10. Three teachers: Nichiren Daishonin, Nikko Shonin, the second high priest and Nichimoku, the third high priest.
11. Takayama Chogyu (1871–1902): Japanese aesthetician, moralist, literary critic and essayist who led the literary and philosophical world of the Meiji Era (1868–1912).
12. *The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection*, trans. Juan Mascaró (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 51.
13. Ibid., p. 38.
14. Kanazawa persecution: The persecution of those who had converted to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism by the 6th feudal lord of the Kanazawa area in what is known today as Ishikawa Prefecture. The persecution began with the oppression of samurai believers but soon spread to those believers among the general public. While many gave up, many others persisted in their faith despite the harsh treatment, which lasted for some seventy years beginning in the the early eighteenth century. (See November 1998 *Living Buddhism*, p. 14)

From the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings"

The Great Teacher Miao-lo of China states in his commentary that anyone who does not understand the text of the "Life Span" chapter is no more than a beast who has no understanding of the debt of gratitude one owes to sovereign, teacher and parent ….

Now Nichiren and his followers who chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo are the father of all living beings, for we save them from the torments of the hell of incessant suffering. The Nirvana Sutra says, "The varied sufferings of all living beings—all these the Thus Come One himself experiences as his own sufferings." And Nichiren declares: The varied sufferings of all living beings—all these Nichiren himself experiences as his own sufferings!

The word *ji* [interpreted as the pronoun "one" or "one's"] marks the beginning of the Jigage section, and the word *shin* ["self" or "body"] in "quickly acquire the body of a Buddha" marks the end. It starts and ends with "oneself," and the words in between describe the "receiving" and "use" of this body. In other words, the Jigage section elucidates the "self that is freely received and used," or the Buddha of absolute freedom. (*Gosho Zenshu*, 758-59)

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