

## FINDING MEANING IN THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

The following dialogue is part two of a discussion among Chelsea Honderich, Sandra Nakasone, Kim Butler-Thomas and Keli McHale on how they used their Buddhist practice to find meaning from the death of a parent. Part one appeared in the May 18 issue of *Seize the Day*.

**Kim:** Keli, why do you think visiting your father's grave affected you so much?

**Keli:** When I spoke to my dad, I realized that I didn't know or believe in myself. I felt detached from my father, and thus, from myself as well. It wasn't until the young women's conference last year at the Florida Nature and Culture Center that all my experiences would become clear to me. I realized I didn't believe in my own Buddha nature and this was blocking my understanding of the mentor-disciple relationship. Now I have new convictions and believe in my own life and mission as SGI President Ikeda's disciple. I feel my father lives on through me and I am determined to respond to him. As President Ikeda states: "The deceased live on in our convictions. Each day we are living together with President Makiguchi and President Toda. I want to engrave in my heart this teaching of the Daishonin that battling evil and injustice is the ultimate offering we can make for the eternal happiness of the deceased" (April Living Buddhism, p. 30).

**Kim:** That reminds me of a quote from *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* that helped me deal with my feelings of regret at the time of my father's death, "When your beloved deceased father hears the sound of your voice chanting Nam-myohorenge-kyo, he will delight in his Buddhahood" (p. 1066).

**Chelsea:** On this point President Ikeda explains: "Buddhism expounds the oneness of life and death, and the oneness of parent and child. So if those family members who are still alive are happy, those who have died will move on a course of happiness, too" (March 16 *World Tribune*, p. 5). By continuing to seek to understand the loss of my mother, I am discovering my true self. I understand that it is important for me to become happy. Then my mom will definitely become happy. This awareness is refreshing. Even more exciting to me is the fact that I can chant to be reborn with her close by me.

**Kim:** Sandra, you also mentioned that your father's death has brought you closer to President Ikeda. I also had this experience at the young women's conference last year, too. There, I penned a poem on Father's Day entitled "My Father, My Mentor." I was inspired to write it because I came to appreciate my dad as the person who introduced the Daishonin's Buddhism to me and taught me how to practice. This led to my appreciation of President Ikeda who taught me how to live.

**Sandra:** That's right. If it hadn't been for my father's tragic death, I wouldn't have met the women's leaders who led me to President Ikeda. Ten years after my father

died, I suffered a year-long suicidal depression. Through that experience, I came to feel in my darkest moments that my SGI friends and President Ikeda understood what I was going through. This has given me hope to carry on with renewed determination, to return to having faith in the Gohonzon and to strengthen and expand my life. President Ikeda says: “That is why Buddhism teaches that we must elevate our lives to the state of Buddhahood while we are alive. We must do our utmost to cultivate and enrich our lives as human beings. That is the purpose of our Buddhist practice. Nothing is more important in life than doing our human revolution. And the younger you are, the easier it is to accomplish” (Oct. 13, 2000, *World Tribune*, p. 5).

**Chelsea:** I, too, feel my mother helped me become closer to President Ikeda through her illness and subsequent death. After she died, President Ikeda planted a plum blossom tree in memory of my mother—who also practiced this Buddhism—and a cherry blossom tree in dedication to my father at the Makiguchi Memorial Garden in Hachioji, Tokyo. I was so moved by his gesture and truly felt that he knows how to give people hope. I knew then that I would always strive to learn how to live my life to the fullest from President Ikeda.

**Kim:** President Ikeda has said that the 21st century will be the grand stage for the youth. As more people join our movement for the happiness of humanity, such experiences will be our jewels with which to encourage others. The experience of dealing with my father’s death, as well as coping with my own illness and subsequent paralyzing depression, has enabled me to have more compassion when encouraging other young women who are facing the same obstacles. Because of my experience, I am determined to live my life to the fullest and respond to President Ikeda and to my father, showing his legacy through my life. To show my appreciation as a daughter and a disciple, I want to take care of my health and fulfill my mission. I am determined to become happy, healthy and live a long life!

**Chelsea:** That’s a wonderful determination! I think that is such an important point. In our society today, when something negative happens our first response is “Why me?” or “I must have done something terrible for this to happen.” Although it’s tough at times, I feel a sense of mission because of my mother’s loss. I now understand the hearts of others suffering a loss and I am better able to support them.

**Sandra:** It truly is about having a mission. President Ikeda writes: “Buddhism teaches the concept of deliberately choosing our circumstances. This is where practitioners of the Mystic Law voluntarily choose to be born into painful situations, so that they might demonstrate the power of Buddhism to others through their struggles and their subsequent triumph. This is the way of life of a bodhisattva” (March 16 *World Tribune*, p. 4). When I read this, I realized I chose these life struggles as my mission to exemplify the validity of the Lotus Sutra and the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I’ve also developed greater empathy and compassion for others sharing similar experiences.

**Chelsea:** I think it’s no coincidence that we have been through the experiences we

have and are having breakthroughs at this time. In *Discussions on Youth*, President Ikeda says: “Those who endure many hardships in youth have already scaled a high mountain in life, well ahead of others. Such people will be the leaders of the twenty-first century” (vol. 1, p. 34). On May 3, 2001, President Ikeda called on the SGI youth to sound the second set of seven bells, launching a new departure for all humanity into a century of peace, a century of life. To do so, he has encouraged us to go back to the fundamental question of understanding life and death.

**Sandra:** Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism teaches that we should “learn first about death then about other things” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1404). This philosophy will be the key in helping to create a century in which people are placed first and foremost, just as understanding death and its role in life is the key to leading a truly happy and fulfilled existence. I am so grateful and honored to have this heartfelt friendship with all of you! Let’s strike seven bells and open a new page in the history of our lives for world peace and the happiness of all humanity!