

## DIALOGUE ON THE LOTUS SUTRA

### 34 THE “LIFE SPAN” CHAPTER—TESTIMONY TO THE ETERNITY OF LIFE

THE WISDOM OF THE LOTUS SUTRA—  
A DISCUSSION ON RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*This is the thirty-fourth installment of an ongoing discussion on the Lotus Sutra with SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and vice chiefs Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. It appeared in the November 1997 issue of The Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai study journal.*

*Part nine of the discussion on the “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra reveals the eternity of life. This time, participants discuss the significance of near-death experiences; the view of life prevalent in the modern world; the relationship of the mind to the brain; and other matters pertaining to the issue of life after death. The discussion points to the urgent need of modern society to establish a correct view of life and death.*

#### 34 The “Life Span” Chapter—Testimony to the Eternity of Life

**“All that I preach is true and not false.**

**“Why do I do this? The Thus Come One perceives the true aspect of the threefold world exactly as it is. There is no ebb or flow of birth and death, and there is no existing in this world and later entering extinction. It is neither substantial nor empty, neither consistent nor diverse. Nor is it what those who dwell in the threefold world perceive it to be. All such things the Thus Come One sees clearly and without error.” (LS16, 226)<sup>1</sup>**

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, 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? (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 563)

**HARUO SUDA:** I heard about the experience of Richard Yoshimachi, a vice general director of the SGI-USA. On April 10, 1993, Mr. Yoshimachi suffered a myocardial infarction while at the SGI-USA Headquarters in Los Angeles and was immediately taken to a nearby hospital. He complained of a tightness in his chest. Told that they would draw some blood, he responded, “Okay,” and then immediately blacked out. When he came to, he found himself surrounded by doctors and nurses. The head nurse was holding his hand. While he was unconscious, his heart had stopped beating for about twenty seconds.

In that time, Mr. Yoshimachi had a remarkable experience. He explained that he found himself surrounded by total darkness in a world of complete silence. He felt no pain and sensed nothing unusual about his heart, nor was he aware of having fallen down. He recalls wondering to himself, “How did I get here?” Looking down, he could see his bare feet, but could discern no surface on which he was standing.

He surveyed the scene around him. To the right he could see nothing, but when he turned to the left, he could make out a faint light coming from somewhere behind his left shoulder. It was far away. It seemed to him as though this faint light was filtering through an opening in a wall.

He immediately walked toward the light. As he did so, it increased in intensity. The light was a tunnel. Following it, he came out in the main auditorium at the SGI-USA Headquarters. The auditorium was a place he had been on many occasions, attending to matters on stage. He now saw himself there. A meeting was going on.

Looking to his right, he saw the smiling faces of members who were seated. On stage, he saw you, President Ikeda, giving a speech. You also wore a bright smile. It then occurred to him that this was the SGI-USA General Meeting held three months before on January 27, 1993. At that moment he opened his eyes to find everyone staring down over him as he lay in bed.

**DAISAKU IKEDA:** I recall that general meeting well. At the time, Mr. Yoshimachi was the SGI-USA youth division leader. Just before that, his mother, who was living in Japan, had passed away. But rather than return immediately to Japan for the funeral, he resolutely stood at the head of the youth division, saying, “I feel that to work for kosen-rufu together with President Ikeda in America is the greatest memorial I can give my mother.”

**TAKANORI ENDO:** Mr. Yoshimachi’s experience sounds like a dream. But seeing light in darkness and observing things from outside one’s body are in fact typical of the experiences of people who have been close to death.

**SUDA:** That’s true. After undergoing a week of intensive therapy, Mr. Yoshimachi told the attending physician, who was a heart specialist, what he had felt while he was unconscious. The doctor responded that he knew of a number of cases where people recounted similar experiences.

**IKEDA:** In recent years, quite a bit of research has been done on near-death encounters. I understand that full-fledged statistical surveys are being conducted.

**KATSUJI SAITO:** Yes. A United States survey revealed that fifteen percent of Americans sampled reported having had a narrow brush with death. Of these, one in three, or as many as eight million people in the U.S. population, reported having had some kind of “other-worldly experience” at that time.<sup>2</sup>

**ENDO:** Eight million people—that’s a phenomenal number.

**IKEDA:** It would be a waste to let such experiences simply go unnoticed. In the future, I hope to see a similarly rigorous survey conducted worldwide.

In a sense, whether there is an afterlife, and, if so, what kind of place it is, is of far more importance than space exploration. It is one of humankind’s greatest issues, for an answer to this question could completely change the thinking and way of life of people everywhere.

I seem to recall that the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) describes his encounter with death in his autobiography.

**ENDO:** Yes. In 1944, Jung suffered a myocardial infarction and collapsed, consequently breaking a leg. He writes that, as he lost consciousness, he then had an incredible experience:

It seemed to me that I was high up in space. Far below I saw the globe of the earth, bathed in a gloriously blue light. I saw the deep blue sea and the continents. Far below my feet lay Ceylon, and in the distance ahead of me the subcontinent of India. My field of vision did not include the whole earth, but its global shape was plainly dis-

tinguishable and its outlines shone with a silvery gleam through that wonderful blue light. In many places the globe seemed colored, or spotted dark green like oxidized silver....

Later I discovered how high in space one would have to be to have so extensive a view—approximately a thousand miles! The sight of the earth from this height was the most glorious thing I had ever seen.<sup>3</sup>

**IKEDA:** He remarks that the Earth appeared blue. That was before the time of the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (1934–68), wasn't it?

**SAITO:** Gagarin [the first person to travel in space] orbited the Earth in 1961, so it was seventeen years before that. In 1944, when Jung wrote this, no one had ever seen the Earth from outer space.

**ENDO:** Jung says that after viewing the Earth, he began to drift through space with the Indian Ocean behind him. He saw a large black boulder. The middle of the boulder was hollowed out, and it became a Hindu temple. Jung entered. While there, he describes feeling as though he had discarded all he ever knew and thought, and everything existing on the earth.

**IKEDA:** It must have been a very vivid experience. This became a major impetus behind Jung's broad-ranging investigations into the world of the spirit.

**ENDO:** In fact, it seems that Jung was convinced that there is life after death.

## The Last Moment: A Settling of Life's Accounts

**IKEDA:** Being close to death is of course not the same as being dead. Still, it is doubtless an instant in which we powerfully sense the reality of death. As a result, for many people, having a near-death experience completely changes the way they live the remainder of their lives.

**ENDO:** Certainly it seems there are many cases where such people became more tolerant toward and actively concerned about the well-being of others.

**SUDA:** Mr. Yoshimachi describes having wondered, "Can it be that we really have so little control over ourselves at the time of death?" He recalls saying to himself, "Life is so fleeting and fragile," and being left with a powerful awareness of the need to spend each day so that if he were to die at any moment he would have no regrets.

**SAITO:** That's the spirit Nichiren Daishonin described as regarding the present as the last moment of one's life.

Though different from what's been termed a near-death experience, it seems that many people who live through major disasters also find their view of life greatly changed by the ordeal. I have heard of a number of such accounts from survivors of the Great Kobe Earthquake (January 1995), many of whom reported that they realized there is something far more precious than material possessions, status, fame and honor—namely, life. Some said that, though intellectually they had understood this before, surviving the disaster left them with a profound understanding of this truth gleaned through actual experience.

**IKEDA:** Confronting death enables us to clearly see what is most important.

I heard the following account of a mother in the United States. She had suffered a stroke and spent several weeks in a coma. Just before dying, she suddenly opened her eyes and, smiling, reached out to something that was invisible to everyone else. With her gaze downward, she made a gesture with her arms as though cradling a baby. Her face at that

moment shone with genuine joy and happiness. She then passed away.

As a matter of fact, it turned out that her first child had died shortly after birth. She later gave birth to five children and raised them all into fine adults. She would never talk about the baby she had lost when she was young. Her surviving children were all convinced that at the moment of death, their mother had met that child and had died with that child in her arms.<sup>4</sup>

**SUDA:** That's very moving.

**IKEDA:** People who have had near-death experiences often report seeing their entire life flash before them in a succession of panoramic scenes. In terms of Buddhist doctrine, we could say that this is equivalent to all of one's karma (consisting of one's thoughts, words and deeds) that has been etched into the *alaya* consciousness—the eighth of the nine consciousnesses, which is likened to a storehouse—appearing before one's eyes in an instant. At any rate, the moment of death is a final settlement of accounts for one's life.

**SAITO:** I think there is deep significance in the Daishonin's conclusion that one should “first learn about death, and then learn about other matters” (GZ, 1404).

**IKEDA:** Shakyamuni lost his mother shortly after he was born and consequently turned his thoughts to death at a very early age. The Daishonin, too, thought about death from the time he was a child.

He writes:

From childhood, I, Nichiren, studied Buddhism with one thought in mind. Life as a human being is fleeting. An outgoing breath does not wait for an incoming one. Not even dewdrops on the verge of being blown off by the wind suffice to describe this transience. No one, wise or foolish, young or old, can escape death. Therefore I thought that I should first learn about death, and then learn about other matters. (GZ, 1404)

The instant just before we die could perhaps be compared to the summit of a mountain. Having completed our climb of the mountain of life, it is from that vantage point that we can look back and for the first time take in the whole of our life. We can survey our accomplishments, what we are leaving behind, how much good or harm we caused, and whether we were kind to others or hurt them. And we can assess which of these was greater. We may also ask ourselves to what did we attach the greatest importance in our lives. At that crucial moment one's mind is bombarded with such questions.

This is one aspect of the last moment of our lives.

**ENDO:** While someone on the brink of death may be lying still, a tumultuous drama may well be unfolding in that person's heart. The only reason it does not appear externally is the lack of physical vigor to express it.

**IKEDA:** Though there are of course cases where people meet their end peacefully, one prisoner reports having had quite a different near-death experience. Because he wanted to get transferred to the hospital ward within the prison, he swallowed a large amount of soap to make himself sick. His plan was successful, but he became a lot sicker than he would have liked. Writhing in excruciating pain, he saw his entire life spread out before his eyes in successive images. He said he relived in minute detail his long criminal career and felt every pang of suffering he had inflicted on others.<sup>5</sup>

**ENDO:** It sounds like a frightening experience. This illustrates the strictness of the principle of cause and effect.

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**IKEDA:** Opinions may vary as to how such experiences should be interpreted, but I believe that, if we set aside all our preconceived ideas regarding life and death and then closely examine actual near-death experiences through surveys and research, we will learn that there are essential elements that simply cannot be explained by the current view that life ends with death. But research in this area has only just begun.

## **Near-Death Experiences Have a Universal Content**

**SAITO:** Yes. Dating from ancient times, there have been a number of instances in Japan of people nearly dying and then regaining consciousness who have reported various mysterious phenomena. These include seeing the River of Three Crossings,<sup>6</sup> having an “out-of-body” experience and meeting deceased parents. While there have been similar accounts from people in all parts of the world, it is only with the pioneering work of psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross that this subject has become a focus of scholarly investigation. In her 1969 work *On Death and Dying*, Dr. Kübler-Ross details a number of actual examples of near-death experiences that she encountered in the course of providing spiritual care to the dying.

**ENDO:** Dr. Kübler-Ross herself had a near-death experience. Describing the incident, she recounts feeling the pain of death and immediately thereafter going through a kind of rebirth. She says that her second self watched as her body approached a light and became engulfed in it, and that the instant it became one with the light, she enjoyed a state of profound peace and tranquillity. When she opened her eyes, she says, she could sense the pulse of life in all living beings, even in insentient things such as rocks.

I was in total love and awe of all life around me. I was in love with every leaf, every cloud, every grass, every little creature. I felt the pulsation of the pebbles on the path and I literally walked above the pebbles, conveying to them, “I cannot step on you. I cannot hurt you.”<sup>7</sup>

**SUDA:** After Dr. Kübler-Ross had broken ground in this area, Dr. Raymond Moody, a specialist in internal medicine, collected a number of accounts of people who had been declared clinically dead and then came back to life (which he published in 1976).<sup>8</sup> This had a major impact, causing scholarly research to get under way in earnest. Today interest has developed such that there is an international research body devoted to studying the issue.

**IKEDA:** Up until then, near-death experiences had been written off as simply dreams or fantasies. But as more data accumulated, the scientific community began to think that perhaps it could not be taken so lightly.

**SAITO:** Yes. Near-death experiences have a number of features that seem to be universal, transcending any cultural and religious differences. Moreover, it seems there were quite a few cases in which people underwent something that directly contradicted religious beliefs they’d held for a lifetime.

What could account for the high degree of similarity in the experiences of people from totally different cultures? From that standpoint, it is logical to infer that there is some universal fact of existence that all people encounter upon death. Furthermore, there are things about these experiences that disciplines such as psychology, pharmacology and neurology cannot adequately explain.

**IKEDA:** At this stage, researchers have not yet come to any definite conclusion as to the

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meaning of near-death experiences.

**ENDO:** That's right. Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought. One postulates that some form of consciousness continues after death. The other holds that all near-death experiences can be explained as neurological phenomena. Scientists who adopt this latter position argue that near-death experiences do not point to the existence of an afterlife.

**IKEDA:** Certainly, any discussion of the hereafter can amount to nothing more than speculation since the existence of such a realm cannot be proven empirically—it is but a theory. Conversely, there are no grounds to assert that a materialist view of life is any more scientific or less speculative than a view which holds that life continues after death. Both views are essentially on the same level, in that neither can be fully substantiated.

## The Claim That There Is Nothing After Death Cannot Be Proven

**SAITO:** It is a fact that many who receive a modern education blindly accept the tenet that belief in the afterlife is superstitious and non-scientific. However, in that it cannot be proven, this assumption itself is a “superstition.”

**IKEDA:** The question then becomes which of these theories is the more logical and persuasive. The answer can only be found through investigation of the many examples of near-death experiences or the accounts of people who claim to remember their past lives, and see which theory can more adequately explain these phenomena.

As was mentioned a little earlier, it seems that the core content of people's experiences at the time of death is not greatly influenced by culture or religion or personal factors. On the contrary, there appears to be a surprisingly high degree of similarity, such as reports of out-of-body experiences. This in itself is rather mysterious.

**SUDA:** An extraordinary number of people who have been close to death have recounted leaving their bodies, hovering in the air, and gazing down on themselves and the people gathered around their bedside. This is of course not to say that everyone has such an experience.

**ENDO:** What happens to people at the moment of death may vary considerably depending on their state of life.

**SUDA:** In that light, keeping in mind that this is the personal account of one individual, I would like to introduce the experience of a Soka Gakkai member. Suffering a recurrence of meningitis, she lost consciousness, developed a high fever and a very irregular pulse, and finally her pupils dilated, indicating that she was about to die. Those around her evidently began discussing funeral arrangements, going so far as to begin talking about what photo of her to use at the funeral.

However, she later came to, saying:

At that time, I felt a cone-shaped object emerge from my head and my mind went completely blank. The object attached itself to a corner of the ceiling of the room and watched the scene below. The part of me looking down from above had left the self that was lying on the bed. And I could see the forms of everyone in the room moving back and forth. The moment I thought, “I am dying,” I was reminded of the Daishonin's passage: “When one dies, if he is destined to fall into hell, his appearance will darken and his body will become as heavy as a stone that requires the strength of a thousand men to move. But in the case of a devotee of true faith, even if she should be a woman seven or eight feet tall and of dark complexion, at the hour of

death, her countenance will become pure and bright, and her body will be as light as a goose feather and as soft and pliable as cotton” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 5, p. 288).

She continues: “Then I was not afraid to die, but I was very much afraid of not attaining Buddhahood. Thinking over and over, ‘I have to attain Buddhahood!’ in this dreamlike state I began trying to chant daimoku, although I could not produce any sound.”

Her mother and others chanted much earnest daimoku, and three days later she regained consciousness.

**SAITO:** Her experience indicates that people in a near-death state can see things that we wouldn’t expect them to if they were actually in a coma. In a number of cases, “unconscious” people have later proven that they could “see” by identifying, for example, the clothing worn by relatives and people who had come to visit them.

**ENDO:** Stranger still, there are instances of blind people relating that they saw the people around them perfectly well. Dr. Kübler-Ross reports on the case of a blind person who could explain in detail the clothing of all the people gathered at his bedside.

**IKEDA:** Although these occurrences would be extremely difficult to explain from a physiological standpoint, I think a great many such examples could be cited. However, once people make up their mind that life after death is superstition, they often close themselves off to any such evidence.

**ENDO:** Even in the SGI, there are many people who, prior to taking faith, would have discounted as irrational the notion that through practicing the Daishonin’s Buddhism you can, for one, strengthen your life force and heal illness. And probably all attempts at explanation, however reasonable, would have at one time been lost on them.

**SAITO:** Dr. Kübler-Ross notes that people will bring forth countless arguments to refute something they are not prepared to accept. But when it comes to the question of dying, she adds, “If you are not interested in knowing about it, it doesn’t make any difference because once you have died you will know it anyway.”<sup>9</sup>

**IKEDA:** Certainly, the only way to really know is to actually die. At that point, however, it may be too late! In any event, from a logical standpoint, it is clear that as of yet there is no explanation with a decisive claim to truth. In this connection, I am always reminded of the argument put forward by Blaise Pascal (1623–62).

**SUDA:** Pascal was the French thinker and mathematician who described human beings as “thinking reeds.”

**IKEDA:** Yes. He is well known for his work in probability theory. True to his intellectual proclivities, Pascal discusses the matter of life after death in terms of a wagering theory.

He asserts that intelligence cannot provide an answer to the question of whether there is an afterlife. This was also the conclusion reached by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). On this premise, Pascal says that if people gamble their lives on the chance that there is life after death, then, even if they are wrong and the reality is that there isn’t, they haven’t lost anything. On the other hand, if they gamble their life on the chance that there is no afterlife, and it turns out that in fact there is, then they are powerless to do anything to alter the course they have taken. Even if at that point they wish to have done more good things while alive for the sake of the hereafter, it is too late.

Therefore, Pascal reasons that gambling on a belief in the afterlife brings fortune if you win and costs nothing if you lose. Losing a wager on the opposite belief, however, leaves you helpless and empty-handed. He therefore concludes that it makes the most sense to lay

one's stakes on the belief that there is life after death, i.e., to accept religion; and that this is the choice that any rational person would make.<sup>10</sup>

This argument may be controversial, but I nevertheless find Pascal's reasoning persuasive.

**ENDO:** His view of this issue as a gamble is interesting. I suppose that no important life decisions would be made if we insisted on always knowing how things were going to turn out; there simply are no guarantees.

**IKEDA:** No one can avoid death—this is the only thing of which we can be absolutely certain. But it's also true that there are few people who give any earnest thought to this most fundamental issue of life and death. Nichiren Daishonin writes:

Having received life, one cannot escape death. Yet though everyone, from the noblest, the emperor, down to the lowliest commoner, recognizes this as a fact, not one person in a thousand or ten thousand truly takes the matter seriously or grieves over it. (MW-5, 41)

These days, in particular, it seems that people increasingly adhere to the position on the matter that Buddhism describes as the “doctrine of annihilation.”

**SAITO:** The doctrine of annihilation refers to the view that upon death life reverts to non-existence. Perhaps it can be said that modern hedonism and intemperance, as well as the underlying sense of unease and pessimism that accompany these conditions, have their roots in this doctrine.

**SUDA:** If you believe that life finishes with death, then the idea of merely seeking to enjoy oneself in the present would be quite seductive. There are of course those who resolve, “Since I only have one life, I will strive to live it to the fullest,” but I think that in reality there are very few people who can truly face death without a sense of foreboding.

## Overcoming the “Suffering of Death”

**IKEDA:** This is an extremely important theme in the field of terminal care. The way we spend our final days when confronted with the prospect of our imminent demise will differ dramatically depending on our view of life and death.

**ENDO:** That's right. A book on this subject titled *After Death* was recently released. The book was written by the American psychotherapist Dr. Sukie Miller. Over the course of many years of caring for patients facing death, she apparently pursued research on the theme of life after death. In the book, the author chronicles her work as one of the first researchers to study the cross-cultural dimensions of life and death issues, and what happens after death.

**IKEDA:** Her keen sense of responsibility in helping patients grappling with the prospect of their own death is probably what started her thinking seriously about the issue.

**ENDO:** That's right. Through observing many such patients, she understood that a patient's attitude toward death differs dramatically depending on his or her view of life and death.

**IKEDA:** When confronted with death, a person's vanity and pretensions are stripped away. Status, honor, wealth—these all count for nothing. We have no choice but to face death with nothing but our naked, unadorned selves.

The Buddhist scriptures describe demons who take one's clothing after death. I think

this symbolizes the idea that worldly trappings and adornments lose all meaning when we die. Buddhism therefore urges that we polish and develop our lives through faith while we're healthy.

**ENDO:** Dr. Miller talks about the death at age 45 of a friend of hers of some twenty years. She writes that he thought much of intellectual achievement, and viewed matters of the spirit and the like as “childish fantasies.” And she explains how he came to doubt any explanation not based on logic and empirical proof:

When death became inevitable for James, he found—to the surprise of all who cared for him—that he had no tools, no comforts, no healing thoughts. Far from wondering what he faced, what aspect of reality he was entering, James trembled and shied away. Regarding death, he had no access to meaning and certainly none to comfort or reassurance.

Dr. Miller writes that “the idea of his inevitable demise inspired nothing but sheer terror in his heart.”<sup>11</sup>

**IKEDA:** That is the stern reality of death. There may be some who live out their lives convinced that death is the absolute end of their existence. But what kind of comfort could such a person give to a close relative or family member who is suffering in the face of imminent death? Would such a conviction and view of life and death ultimately provide any hope?

The Buddhist perspective of life as existing eternally over the three existences of past, present and future not only brings hope to oneself, it can also encourage and give strength and hope to others.

**ENDO:** It may well be that people seek some kind of “immortality.” In the United States, the process of cryogenics is being applied to preserve the human body in a frozen state. There are reportedly a number of facilities that offer this service.

When a person who has contracted in advance with one of the facilities dies, his or her body is frozen, the idea being that future scientific advances might some day make to bring that person back to life.

**SAITO:** That sounds incredible, but I wonder if it is really possible to revive a human body that has been frozen. The entire scheme depends on future developments in medicine.

**ENDO:** That's true. At present, experiments on animals haven't been successful. Even so, despite the considerable contract fee, there is a steady stream of applicants.

A procedure also exists where just the brain is removed and preserved in a frozen state. It attracted a lot of attention recently when a big-name celebrity signed up for this service.

**IKEDA:** This suggests just how deep-seated is the desire for immortality. I recall, incidentally, that the first Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti (259–210 B.C.E.) of the Ch'in dynasty sought an elixir of perennial youth and eternal life.

Removing just the brain and preserving it is a thoroughly modern approach, in that it reflects the assumption that the brain is the storehouse of the mind and personality.

**ENDO:** This is the notion that we took up in our first discussion on the “Life Span” chapter, that the mind is solely a neurological phenomenon.

## The Brain Is the Mind's "Venue of Manifestation"

**IKEDA:** It is clear that the mind is closely related to the body, and to the brain in particular. But it is debatable whether the mind exists only within the brain.

The British biologist Rupert Sheldrake uses a simple analogy to explain the relationship between memory and the brain. He likens it to the connection between televised images and sounds and the television receiver. You might, for instance, view something impressive on television; but once it passes you will not be able to find the same scene anywhere in the television. The television merely receives radio waves. An image will not appear without a receiver, but that doesn't mean that the image exists inside the television.

**SAITO:** This analogy suggests that the mind, even if it functions through the mediation of the brain, is not housed in the brain itself.

**IKEDA:** That's correct. The mind and the brain cannot be separated. In that sense, there is a oneness. This is not to say, however, that they are the same or identical.

The relationship is perhaps best characterized as "two but not two." The spiritual aspect, which is the mind, and the physical aspect, which is the neurological phenomena, while distinct ("two"), function together as one ("not two"). This is the viewpoint of Buddhism. It could be said that the brain is the venue where the activity of the mind becomes manifest.

**ENDO:** If a television set isn't in good working condition, the picture will not appear clearly. Likewise, someone whose brain is damaged will experience abnormal psychological phenomena. If a television set is completely broken, there will be no image at all. In the same way, when the brain cells are destroyed upon death, the venue where one's psychological and spiritual activity takes place is also destroyed. I think it can nevertheless be postulated that this merely represents the disappearance of their venue of manifestation, and that the functions of the mind actually continue even after death.

**SUDA:** People with unflagging belief in the advance of science seem to think that with further advances in research on the brain it will eventually become possible to explain all spiritual functions in terms of the neurological activities of the brain, even in areas that at this point defy explanation. But no matter how meticulously brain cells are studied, I don't think it will ever be possible to pinpoint the mind.

**IKEDA:** Take, for example, the case of someone thinking about the melody of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." This psychological state would probably be accompanied by some kind of neurological phenomena. But even if that neurological activity were examined in great detail, one would not discover in it the melody itself of "Ode to Joy."

**SUDA:** Still, there are many scientists who believe that this will someday become possible. Such belief is part and parcel of modern science. Often termed elementalism, this is the idea that you can get to the heart of anything by analyzing its minute constituent parts.

But, regardless of how closely the matter is probed, human life cannot be explained by analyzing the human body, just as simply combining together all the necessary organs and tissues will not produce a human being.

**ENDO:** One scholar criticizes this approach of science, saying, "Who could understand music only from an analysis of the composition of the instruments of an orchestra?"<sup>12</sup>

## Neither Annihilation nor Eternity

**SAITO:** It seems that many people view life and death based on this “doctrine of annihilation,” or what we might call “annihilationism.” At the same time, the concept of an immortal soul is also prevalent in many different forms. This is the “doctrine of eternity,” the idea that there is an unchanging “soul” distinct from the body and which continues on forever. Both concepts, however, are rejected by Buddhism.

**IKEDA:** Yes. There is no such thing as a spiritlike entity that flutters through the air. All that really exists is the oneness of body and mind. When we die, our life, in a state of non-substantiality, becomes one with the universe. Both the doctrine of annihilation and the doctrine of eternity are flawed. Each is a biased view that accounts for only one side of the truth.

What, then, is the “eternal life” that the “Life Span” chapter explains? Let us take up that question next time.

Nichiren Daishonin says, “The essential teaching for solving the suffering of life and death is to be found only in the ‘Life Span’ chapter” (GZ, 1022).

How we perceive the meaning of death and the meaning of life hinges completely on whether we are able to establish a correct view of life and death. Goethe says, “those who have no hope of another life are already dead in this one.”<sup>13</sup>

We study Buddhism to live vibrantly and with eternal hope. Will death, which inevitably comes to each of us, be a time of dignity and honor? Or will we end in pitiful demise? This is completely reliant on how we live our lives right now, today. In that sense, the “moment of death” truly exists in the present.

*To be continued*

1. Editor’s note: All quotations from the Lotus Sutra are from *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For 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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3. C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), pp. 289–90.
4. Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley, *Final Gifts* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1992).
5. Susan Blackmore, *Dying To Live: Near-Death Experiences* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 190.
6. River of Three Crossings: A river that the dead are said to cross after their demise. It has three points of crossing, shallow, deeper and deepest, and the place where a person crosses depends on the individual’s karma.
7. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death Is of Vital Importance: On Life, Death and Life after Death* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1995), p. 103.
8. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Life after Life* (New York: Stackpole Books, 1976).
9. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Life after Death* (Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1991), p. 10.
10. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. H. F. Stewart (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950), pp. 117–21.

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11. Sukie Miller, *After Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 29.
12. Erwin Chargaff, *Heraclitean Fire: Sketches from a Life before Nature* (New York: The Rockefeller University Press, 1978), p. 170.
13. J. P. Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. Gisela C. O'Brien (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1964), p. 33.

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