

**LIVING THE TEACHINGS (3)**  
**AN UNTIMELY DEATH DOES NOT DIMINISH LIFE**  
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When he was alive, he was a Buddha in life, and now he is a Buddha in death. He is a Buddha in both life and death. This is what is meant by that most important doctrine called attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "If one can uphold this [sutra], one will be upholding the Buddha's body." Neither the pure land nor hell exists outside oneself; both lie only within one's own heart.

Since your deceased husband was a votary of this sutra, he doubtless attained Buddhahood just as he was. You need not grieve so much over his passing. On the other hand, to grieve is only natural for ordinary people. However, even sages are sometimes sad. ("Hell is the Land of Tranquil Light," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 456,458)

**Background:** Written July 11, 1274 to Ueno-ama Gozen. She had raised nine children after the death of her husband in 1265 and was a devoted follower of Nichiren Daishonin. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of her husband's death, she had sent offerings and a letter to the Daishonin. This letter was his reply.

Shortly after beginning my practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in the early 60's, I returned from college in Tokyo to my hometown of Fuji City to visit my mother. She had separated from my father and was living with my brother and sister. My father was trying to make a living in Tokyo. Their marriage had experienced many hardships as they struggled financially in post-war Japan, and after they separated, he was still not able to send her much support for the family.

As I grew up, I witnessed the suffering of my mother, and I knew she was unhappy. She knew me to be an unhappy young man, especially after injuring my back just before I found the Daishonin's Buddhism. She understood I was miserable. So, when I arrived for a visit, the happy son smiling into her face shocked her. More than anyone else, she could see what a difference my practice in the Soka Gakkai had made in my life. She was eager to join immediately, in contrast to my father who angrily opposed my practice. She was so happy to receive the Gohonzon. My sister and grandmother also began practicing.

It seemed that my mother had lived with some kind of illness her whole life. In desperation to become healthy she had tried many religions including many of the so-called "new religions" that appeared in Japan after the war. But nothing could help her and she continued to suffer. But her biggest source of unhappiness was her relationship with her mother-in-law—my grandmother. They fought over little things, big things and anything.

Over the next couple of years, improving their relationship would be one of her biggest benefits. Ironically, it would also lead to a great tragedy. Nearly four years after my mother joined the Soka Gakkai she was killed in an accident at age 53. She had become the primary caregiver for my aging grandmother and was on an errand to get medicine. She waited for a bus, but none came, so she got a ride from a man in an old truck. Along the way, her door somehow came open and she fell onto the road to her death. I was at work in Tokyo when

I received the call from my younger brother. I was facing an event that would profoundly change my understanding of Buddhism and my faith.

When I arrived home, my mother's body lay in our living room. My father arrived also. My brother was upset and said it was the Soka Gakkai's fault. I was in a state of disbelief. I could not explain intellectually what had happened. When I began practicing, I was told we could overcome obstacles and become happy. Why did she have to die this way?

I chanted to the Gohonzon long into the night and the next morning. Gradually, my mind settled and I thought about my mother and her difficult life. I came to see my mother's life in a different light. The last four years of her life had not been miserable. For the first time in her life, since she joined the Soka Gakkai, she had finally become happy. She had just been appointed a leader in her district and was dedicated to kosen-rufu. This was her life when she died. As I prayed, my grief gave way to appreciation. If it was her karma to die young, she did not die miserable. She lived long enough to change her unhappy destiny to a happy life dedicated to the Law. This is what she would carry to the next life.

Buddhism distinguishes between physical death and spiritual death. Spiritual death is the death of a person's desire to seek the Law and attain enlightenment. I realized that at the moment of her death, my mother carried the desire for enlightenment in her heart. She left the misery of this life behind having changed her destiny in the last three years of practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

In "Letter to the Brothers," Nichiren Daishonin quotes the Nirvana Sutra: "By suffering an untimely death...one can avoid falling into hell." The Daishonin explains that:

We, who now believe in the correct teaching, in the past once committed the offense of persecuting its practitioners, and therefore are destined to fall into a terrible hell in the future. The blessings gained by practicing the correct teaching, however, are so great that by meeting minor sufferings in this life we can change the karma that destines us to suffer terribly in the future. (WND, 497)

In an essay by President Toda on the subject of tragic deaths he says that from the Buddhist view of the eternity of life, a person's untimely death can be regarded as a "relatively minor hardship," enabling one to expiate negative karma.

Although my mother's death may seem like a bad death, I do not see it that way. Everyone wants a "good death," but what is more important is the quality of life when it is our time to die not the method by which we die. To me, a good life at the time of death equals a good death, which equals a good life again. An untimely death does not diminish a life; it can bring to light a person's dedication to kosen-rufu.

That is why this quote by Nichiren Daishonin consoling the widow Ueno-ama Gozen is meaningful to me:

When he was alive, he was a Buddha in life, and now he is a Buddha in death. He is a Buddha in both life and death. This is what is meant by that most important doctrine called attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. Since your deceased husband was a votary of this sutra, he doubtless attained Buddhahood just as he was. (WND, 456, 458)

I was saddened by my mother's death, but I came to a deeper understanding of death

and was no longer frightened by it. The Buddhist life-philosophy and my growing conviction in the Gohonzon enabled me to deal with this tragedy correctly. In Buddhism, everything that happens can teach us about the Law.