

## DISCUSSIONS ON YOUTH LIFE AND DEATH ARE ONE

**‘Life and death are one with the universe,’ SGI President Ikeda says. ‘In the birth of a single life, the whole universe approves and cooperates. All of you have been sent here with the blessings and congratulations of the entire universe!’**

**SGI President Ikeda:** We are finally approaching the countdown to the 21st century. This is your age. The future rests in your hands. I hope you will make the 21st century wonderful.

Please make it a century in which the life of each individual is cherished and respected to the utmost.

A century without discrimination, without bullying, war or murder.

A century in which no child cries with hunger, in which no mothers or children take their lives in despair.

A century without environmental destruction.

A century free of academic elitism, greed and materialism.

A century in which human rights are upheld as the most precious treasure.

A century of true democracy, in which the people hold corrupt political leaders to account.

A century in which the people exercise sound judgment and pay no heed to the mass media’s lies.

I hope you will make it a century in which each of your precious dreams comes true and your unique individuality blossoms to the fullest.

To realize these goals, it is vital that each of you achieve victory, that each of you grow into people of philosophy and compassion, into people who possess both real ability and the sincerity to understand others’ hearts.

Your victory will be the victory of the 21st century. You are our only hope.

### **A distorted understanding of death has deadlocked society.**

**Teruhiko Yumitani:** We’ll do our best to create a century of life.

**Ikeda:** How we view life—the perspective we have on life, on death, on the human condition—is the basis for everything.

Japan today is in deep darkness. It has reached a deadlock, as has much of the rest of the world.

What is the root cause of this? It is a distorted understanding of the fundamental question of life and death. Society’s leaders and the majority of people have avoided thinking about this most important of issues, brushing it aside in the single-minded pursuit of immediate desires.

As a result, we are now suffering the consequences of this negligence. The bottom line is this: If we do not turn our attention to the fundamental issue of life and death, no matter what superficial measures we may take, nothing will ever really change. It is like trying to treat an illness with pain relievers without addressing the cause. Though our symptoms may be eased temporarily, we are only deceiving our bodies, and we will not get better.

The British historian Dr. Arnold J. Toynbee held that the cause of the world’s misfortune

is that leaders in all fields fail to ponder the basic question of death.

**Yoshiko Ueda:** Which means they do not really understand the true value of life, either.

**Young people should be the first to seriously consider life's big questions.**

**Ikeda:** This is a major problem underlying environmental pollution as well. Look at the apathetic response to the terrible tragedy of industrial mercury poisoning, known as Minamata disease, in Minamata, Japan, in the 1950s and 1960s. Not the company responsible, nor the bureaucracy, nor the government responded with an attitude that indicated valuing people's lives as the highest priority. All they offered was a cold-hearted, bureaucratic response that put the interests of big business first.

The consumption of fish contaminated with mercury from industrial waste discharged by the company into Minamata Bay caused healthy people to experience numbness in their extremities and rendered them unable to coordinate voluntary muscular movements. It devastated their nervous systems, causing some to go into convulsions and die. Children were born deaf, blind and with speech impediments. Innocent people were forced into a living hell.

Yet it took 15 years from the time the first victims appeared until the Japanese government finally recognized the disease as pollution-related, in 1968. Why was immediate action not taken? Why were efforts not made to save these precious lives before wasting time coming up with all kinds of excuses and rationalizations?

Among the company officials, bureaucrats and government leaders, there were many who had graduated from Japan's so-called top universities. In fact, almost all of them had. But these people, who should have been Japan's best and brightest, lacked something crucial as human beings.

This is frightening. It points to a fundamental flaw in Japan's educational system—an absence of a solid life philosophy and humanism.

**Ueda:** I completely agree.

**Ikeda:** You are all still young, and I am sure that most of you do not have a clear conception of death. That is only natural. But precisely because you are young, I want you to think seriously about such questions as: What is life? What happens when we die? Why are we born?

I want you to grow into adults who possess a firm philosophy of life and death. A philosopher has said that an awareness of death, our mortality, is what separates humankind from the rest of the animal kingdom.

**Yumitani:** One of our high school division members in Tokyo had a close encounter with death when he was a member of his school's track and field team. In December of his freshman year, he was practicing landings for the high jump when he fell and hit his head. He dislocated and fractured his cervical vertebrae and was lucky that he did not die then and there. He went into surgery for six hours, and though it was a success, he could no longer move the body he had once taken for granted without others' help. He felt extremely sorry for himself.

Then, on Jan. 2, he received a poem from you, President Ikeda:

*Day after day I pray  
For your health,  
For you possess a profound mission.*

He was so moved by these words that the courage to challenge his physical condition welled up from the depths of his being. He chanted daimoku and put great efforts into his physiotherapy sessions. And he left the hospital on April 3. Today, he is back at school and even back on the track and field team.

He says: “I could have died, but I am fine now. I am so happy. My injury taught me anew the tremendous power of the Gohonzon. From this day on, as a high school division member, I intend to think carefully about my mission, which President Ikeda mentioned in the poem he sent me, and carry it out without fail!”

### **Everyone has a mission – that is why we are born.**

**Ikeda:** How admirable!

Everyone has a mission. That is why we are born. That is why, no matter what happens, we must press on in life through all things.

The Japanese word for mission means to use one’s life. For what purpose do we use our life? For what purpose have we been born in this world, sent from the universe? Why have we been dispatched here?

Buddhism views the universe as one giant living entity. If we compare it to a vast ocean, each individual life is like a wave on that ocean. When the wave rises from the ocean’s surface, that is life. When it merges back into the ocean, that is death.

Life and death are one with the universe. In the birth of a single life, the whole universe approves and cooperates. All of you have been sent here with the blessings and congratulations of the entire universe!

All life is equally precious. We cannot apply a hierarchy of value to life, making one living thing more worthy than another. Each life is unique and individual.

Every person’s life is as valuable as the universe — it is one with the life of the universe and just as important. Nichiren Daishonin declares, “Life is the foremost of all treasures” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1125). He also states: “The Buddha says that life is something that cannot be purchased even for the price of an entire major world system” (WND, 983). “One day of life is more valuable than all the treasures of the major world system” (WND, 955).

That is why we must not take our lives. That is why we must not resort to violence, why we must not hurt or bully others. No one has the right to harm the precious treasure that is life.

**Yumitani:** One student writes that when he was a victim of bullying, he questioned why he had to be born into such a painful world—why he had been born at all.

**Ikeda:** Why have we been born? Youth is the time to search for the answer to this question. Youth is our “second birth.” Our first is our physical birth, but it is during our youth that we are born as a person.

That is why it is such a difficult period in life, why we have to go through so much. It is a struggle, like the struggle of a chick trying to break out of its egg.

The crucial thing is never to give up. As you struggle to find your way, please pray,

think, study, talk with your friends and give your all to taking care of what is important now. If you challenge yourself without throwing in the towel, then your mission—the one that only you can fulfill—will reveal itself without fail.

**Ueda:** Yes. If the chick gives up halfway, it will never break out of the egg.

### **Those defeated by their problems cannot grow as human beings.**

**Ikeda:** I hope you will not let your problems and struggles defeat you. Those beaten by their problems experience no fresh growth or “rebirth” as human beings. They end up living by instinct alone, like animals. And that is spiritual death.

You all know Mr. Mikhail Gorbachev, the former president of the Soviet Union, who is a friend of mine. Gorbachev is responsible for bringing an end to the Cold War. He is a hero who had the sense to say, “This foolishness cannot go on!” Wanting to find a way that would bring happiness to all humanity, he took a decisive step toward change.

As the supreme leader of the Soviet Union, he was virtually all-powerful in his home country. He could easily have lived in comfort in the citadel of power. But he chose a different path—a dangerous, risky path.

Attempts were made on his life, and he was betrayed and persecuted. But amid this, he refused to abandon his dream for a society that put people first.

When Gorbachev and his late wife, Raisa, visited our Kansai Soka Junior and Senior High School in November 1997, Mrs. Gorbachev addressed the students. “You will experience all kinds of hurts in life,” she said. “Not all of them will heal. Nor can you always realize your dreams. But there is something that you can achieve. There is a dream that you can make a reality. Therefore, the person who triumphs in the end is the person who gets up after each fall and pushes onward. The ability to keep on fighting is a matter of the spirit. Death does not come to the person who is tired—it comes to the person who has stopped moving forward.

“You may think you are still young today, but before you know it, you will have reached maturity. That is life. Soon you will all have to take responsibility for your families, your nation and the entire planet.

“May your dreams come true! May wonderful things occur in your lives! May you all be happy!”

**Ueda:** What an encouraging message!

### **How incredible it is to be alive right now!**

**Ikeda:** The Gorbachevs experienced trials and hardships beyond description. “But we have survived,” they said. “We have lived and we have fought.”

All of you are alive now—what an incredible thing that is! I hope you will not waste this wonderful treasure.

Speaking of Russia, I have talked to you before about how the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky narrowly escaped being killed by a firing squad. While waiting for his turn with the executioners, he thought about how he would spend his final moments. He knew that in five minutes he would be tied to a post and shot, thus disappearing from this world. He did not want to waste those five precious minutes—they were the last treasure he had. He had to use them carefully.

He divided his remaining time into three parts. The first two minutes he would spend

saying farewell to his friends and loved ones. The next two minutes he would devote to thinking of himself for the last time. His final minute he would take one last look around.

At the same time, he decided that should he for some reason be spared, he would turn every minute into an age and never squander another second.

**Yumitani:** What an intense experience that must have been!

**We should spend every minute of our lives valuably.**

**Ikeda:** If you think about it, although we may not be destined to die five minutes from now, we are all, without exception, going to die at some point. We can count on it 100 percent. There is nothing surer than this.

Victor Hugo says, “We are all under sentence of death, but with a sort of indefinite reprieve.” Ideally, we should live every minute of our lives valuably, as if it were the last moment of our lives. Those who live aimlessly are left with a sense of emptiness at the end of their lives, but those who live all-out, striving right to the end, will die peacefully.

Leonardo da Vinci says, “As a well-spent day brings happy sleep, so life well used brings happy death.” One aware that death could come at any time will live each day to the fullest. In a race, as well, it is the goal that makes us run with all our might.

**Ueda:** Facing the reality of death brings meaning to life.

**Yumitani:** I guess if we did not die, our lives would become aimless and empty—just like we do not study unless we know there is an exam!

**Ikeda:** That is true. A life without death might seem like a nice idea, but it would also mean that we would put everything off, thinking that even if we did not take care of things now, we could still do it in 10 or 20 years. In fact, we would probably never do anything at all. We would all become completely decadent and lazy.

**Yumitani:** I imagine that is what happens to people who spend their days living haphazardly, never giving serious thought to the reality of death.

**Ikeda:** In the face of death, such things as wealth, status, honors and academic qualifications mean nothing. At that moment, all is ultimately decided by your life, unadorned of all external trappings.

Are you fulfilled? Or is your life empty, weak and spiritless? That is why we need faith to forge and develop our lives.

**Ueda:** And we never know just when death will come. So we cannot afford to waste even a moment.

**Ikeda:** No, we cannot. I have adopted the daily creed of “Make today worth one week!” I have not yet lived a hundred years, but I have striven to create several hundred years of value.

**Nothing makes you stronger than having a sense of mission.**

**Yumitani:** If we live our lives earnestly and to the fullest each day, we will have no regrets.

**Ikeda:** It is about having a sense of mission. Nothing is stronger.

José Rizal, the hero of Philippine independence, gave his life for his mission. He was executed by a firing squad, but in a final letter, he wrote, “I do not regret what I have done, and if now I had to commence again I would do the same as I have done, because it was my duty.”

**Ueda:** It would be wonderful if we could all end our lives feeling that if we had to do it all again, we would walk the same path.

**Ikeda:** To live that way requires a firm view of life and death.

What happens to us when we die? What happens to our life? Next time, let us look at the way Buddhism answers these questions.

*Part one of a discussion on life and death among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division leaders Teruhiko Yumitani (young men's leader) and Yoshiko Ueda (young women's leader).*