

DISCUSSIONS ON YOUTH ELEVATING OUR LIVES TO BUDDHAHOOD

‘The self that exists at that moment of death is the one that will continue throughout the state of death and beyond into the next life,’ SGI President Ikeda says. ‘That is why Buddhism teaches that we must elevate our lives to the state of Buddhahood while we are alive.’

Part two 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).

Teruhiko Yumitani: Everyone, at one point or other in their lives, wonders why they are born, why they die and what happens after death.

One of our high school division members said his uncle’s death really set him thinking. When he saw his uncle’s lifeless form, he said, he thought it looked like a wax figure. He could not quite grasp what death meant.

Yoshiko Ueda: Another student writes: “When I have a lot of problems and am having a hard time, I wonder why I am alive — what the point of it all is. I feel so lost sometimes, and it makes me feel sad and hopeless about life.”

Yet another says: “When my grandfather died, I thought about life and death. I wondered why it is that people can die so easily, just like that. I also regretted that I had not done more for my grandfather while he was alive.”

We should give deep thought to the question of life and death throughout our lives.

SGI President Ikeda: To ponder the question of death in this way is in itself extremely valuable. It is proof of our humanity.

Generally, as people grow older and get caught up in the busy routines of daily life, they tend to gradually stop thinking about such fundamental questions. But the question of life and death is a very important one — one that we should give deep thought to throughout our lives.

If we compare our existence to a tree, the question of life and death is like the tree’s roots. While it may seem like we have a whole variety of problems and issues to deal with, they are no more than the leaves and branches, which are all connected to the fundamental root issue of life and death.

Yumitani: Some people take the attitude “I am still young. I do not need to think about such things now. It can wait until I am old and at death’s door.”

Ikeda: Well, perhaps we can look at it in the following way: Suppose we have a high school freshman. She wants to decide on her plans and goals for her freshman year. But she cannot meaningfully do that without deciding what her plans are for the whole duration of her high school years.

Yumitani: That makes sense.

Ikeda: So she tries to plan her entire high school career. But now she finds that, unless she thinks about what she is going to do after graduation, she cannot plan her high school years wisely, either.

Ueda: Yes, unless you at least have a rough idea of what you want to do when you leave school—whether it be finding a job or going on to college—you cannot really decide how to best spend your time at high school.

Ikeda: In the same way, you cannot really meaningfully contemplate the question of how you should live your life unless you know what happens to you after life’s “graduation”—in other words, after death.

Yumitani: Yes, I see what you mean.

The view that there is no life after death leads to the degeneration of ethics and morality.

Ikeda: That is why it is so important for you to be young philosophers and deeply ponder this question of life and death in your youth.

If people let themselves be guided by the belief that there is no life after death, they can easily succumb to thinking they can do what they like. And when they hit a deadlock, they may think they can just put an end to their lives and be done with it all.

Yumitani: Yes, hypothetically.

Ueda: I agree. Going back to the example of high school, I am sure if there were nothing after graduation, most high school students would think it pointless to study so hard.

Yumitani: Well, people who believe there is nothing after death might still make some effort so that they could live a pleasant, enjoyable life during the time they are here. But they probably would not work hard to perfect themselves or serve others.

Ikeda: Of course, the reality is that not everyone who thinks that death is the end lives recklessly with absolute abandon. Not only are there social restrictions against that, but deep in our hearts, human beings intuitively know that life is eternal and there is a right way for us to live.

Yumitani: There are also people who say that precisely because this is our one and only lifetime—because there is no life after death—we have to make the best of the present. But not everyone thinks this way.

Ikeda: In today’s world, the materialist view that there is no life after death has become prevalent. I think that is the reason that ethics and morality have degenerated into mere pretense. Dostoyevsky, in his great novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, has the character Ivan make an observation to the effect: “Supposing there is no God, what then would be a crime? Wouldn’t all things be lawful?” If we replace “God” with “life after death,” the

same question holds. We would have a world where anything goes as long as you do not get caught.

Yumitani: In fact, that seems to be the way the world is heading.

Individuality never ceases to exist, although in death it becomes intangible.

Ueda: Some people ask: “Is death really the end? And if so, doesn’t that mean that everything in life is empty and meaningless?”

Ikeda: We are beings who search for meaning in life. As long as we have a meaning, we can withstand any suffering. But without a meaning in life, we can have everything we want and still be completely empty, our spirit slowly dying.

Just as you have to adopt the larger perspective of your entire high school career to give meaning to your first year, you have to adopt a larger perspective to see the meaning of your life. That larger perspective is the perspective of this lifetime and what happens after death.

Without that perspective, you will not appreciate the true meaning of your life. This is why a person’s understanding of life and death is so important.

Yumitani: Buddhism teaches that life is eternal. In our last discussion (Sept. 15 *World Tribune*), you described the universe as a great living entity, like a vast ocean, and each individual life as a wave on that ocean.

Ueda: When the wave rises up from the surface of the ocean, that is life. And when it merges back into the ocean, that is death.

Yumitani: I am still a little unclear about what exactly that “merging” means.

Ikeda: Mr. Toda once said that if you drop some ink into a pond, it dissolves and disappears. That is what death is like. Later on, if you use some device to recapture the components of the dissolved ink and bring them together again, that is life, he said.

Yumitani: Though an individual life merges back into the life of the universe, its identity does not disappear.

Ikeda: That individual life does not cease to exist. When it encounters the right conditions, it will once again be manifested.

But if you ask whether that life exists as a tangible thing, the answer is absolutely not. We cannot locate it here or there in the universe. It has become one with the universe as a whole.

It is neither existence nor nonexistence. In Buddhism, we refer to this as the state of non-substantiality.

Let me use a metaphor. Today, radio waves in infinite number are crisscrossing the globe. Right here and now there are radio waves of all different frequencies—for radio and TV broadcasts and the like—flying all around us. Some of them originate in Japan, some in other countries.

Though we may say those waves exist, we can neither see nor hear them. We cannot smell or touch them. But if we have a radio, a TV set or some other appropriate receiver, and we tune it to the right frequency, we can hear the sounds and see the images those waves carry.

Yumitani: A TV set becomes the necessary condition to make an invisible wave visible in the form of a video image.

Ikeda: We could perhaps call this the wave's transition from death to life. Of course, this is just a metaphor.

In much the same way, though, individual lives merge into the universe upon death. They do not crash into each other. And, by the same token, they do not ride on someone's back or hold hands! Each becomes one with the universe, yet retains its individuality.

Your physical and spiritual energy cannot be separated in life or death.

Ueda: Is that individuality different from the concept of a spirit or soul that is separate from the physical body?

Ikeda: Completely different. Buddhism teaches that such a thing as a substantial, separate soul does not exist. In all life, mind and body—the spiritual and physical aspects—are one.

Both in life and after death, an entity's physical and spiritual energy cannot be separated from each other. They are one and indivisible.

It is just a superstition to believe that the soul or spirit can separate itself from the body and fly about here and there. Life—in which the spiritual and physical are always one—merges into the great universal life, while preserving its individuality.

Yumitani: When we die, the brain is destroyed, so how can there still be any spiritual energy? The reason that most people today think there is nothing after death is that they believe that the spirit or mind resides in the brain, and as such it cannot persist after the brain cells have died.

Ikeda: That is an important point. I have gone into this question in detail on various occasions, and I hope you will study those discussions and writings, too. But the main point is that the brain is the place or physical vehicle for the activity of the mind or spirit—it is not the mind or spirit itself. That is the correct way to look at it.

For example, the great French philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson compared the relationship between our brain and consciousness to a hook and the clothes hung on it. When the hook is gone—that is, when the brain is dead—the clothes fall to the floor. In other words, mental activity becomes impossible. But the hook is not the clothes.

Ueda: Speaking of Bergson, I understand that the first time you were invited to a Soka Gakkai discussion meeting at the age of 19 and heard that it was a gathering where people talked about “the philosophy of life,” you asked, “Are you referring to Bergson?”

Ikeda: Yes, that is right. Bergson was active about a hundred years ago, which is no doubt why he used the metaphor of clothes and a hook. Today it might be better to use the

example of televised images and sound and the TV set or monitor that is needed to make them appear.

In this scenario, memory and other mental activities are like the images and sound. They cannot appear without a TV set, which is like the brain. And just because your favorite screen idol appears on television does not mean you will find a picture of him or her inside if you take the TV apart.

In the same way, when the brain dies, mental energy loses the vehicle for manifesting itself, but that does not mean that that energy itself has ceased to exist. Nor does the body's physical energy cease to exist when the body dies. It loses the vehicle for its activity and becomes latent, dormant.

Yumitani: And the next time we are reborn, such latent energy becomes active again, doesn't it?

Ikeda: Yes, the dormant energy is manifested and activated once more when the phase of life is entered again. However, strictly speaking, our lives are not "reborn"—they exist continuously. The identity of our lives does not change.

Our lives—in which body and mind are one—continue unchanged. The essence of life is not one where a soul leaves the body and flies up into the sky or something.

The realm of life is full of mysteries.

Ueda: I have heard of people who say they have seen a ghost or heard the voice of their dead grandmother. Are such experiences just dreams or illusions?

Ikeda: No, those can be real experiences. But the person is not seeing a ghost. It may be that the waves of a person who is in the state of death overlap, for some reason, with the waves of the living, and the living person experiences something like a vision or the voice of the dead person.

The realm of life is full of mysteries. You might think of it as similar to cases when for some reason you hear another conversation on your telephone line while you are talking to someone else.

Yumitani: Yes, I sometimes find that happens when I use my cell phone.

Ikeda: Mr. Toda used to say that such things as seeing ghosts or hearing voices happen when your life force is weak. You are weak, so you are overpowered by other's signals, and you end up acting like a radio or TV receiver for them. That is why you are the only one who hears or sees these things.

If your life force is strong, that will not happen. In fact, by chanting you can send the waves of the state of Buddhahood to such an individual and help him or her find peace.

Yumitani: There are some lives that do not merge peacefully into the life of the universe, then?

Ikeda: Yes, some merge back into the universal life in dreadful pain and suffering. Some are terrified, as if a horrible monster were pursuing them. And some sleep restlessly, as if troubled by nightmares.

The sound of our chanting reaches the lives of those in the state of death.

Ueda: Can we help such individuals with our chanting?

Ikeda: Yes, we can. The sound of our chanting reaches the lives of those who have entered the state of death.

Of course, it also reaches those who are still alive. The power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo can illuminate anywhere in the universe, even the farthest reaches of the state of Hell, filling it with the warm light of hope, peace and comfort.

The Mystic Law is comprised of the Chinese characters *myo* and *ho*. *Myo*, mystic, symbolizes death and *ho*, law, symbolizes life. Together, as the Mystic Law, they represent the oneness of life and death.

Both life and death are phases of our existence. Though life and death may seem completely separate and independent of each other, the identity of our life that exists within that dynamic is one and unchanging. It continues forever through alternating periods of life and death.

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the fundamental rhythm of that eternal life. That is why chanting has the power to help even those in the state of death.

Yumitani: What determines whether an individual life suffers or is at peace after death? Do Hell and Eagle Peak really exist?

Ikeda: Yes, they do exist. But they are not in any one place. The state of Hunger is not somewhere beyond Saturn, and Eagle Peak is not just the other side of the sun. I want you to study more about the Ten Worlds [Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity, Rapture, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood], but the important thing to remember is that just as the Ten Worlds exist within each person, they exist within the universe, too.

The life of a person whose basic tendency while alive is the state of Hell will, after death, merge into the universal state of Hell. The state of Hell exists in our lives, but we cannot say that it is any particular place within us.

Just because you have a toothache, you cannot really say that the state of Hell is in your tooth. Your whole being is in pain, and your whole being is in Hell. In the same way, when a person whose basic life-tendency is the state of Hell dies, the whole universe for that individual becomes Hell.

Our basic life-tendency determines which of the Ten Worlds we are in after death.

Ueda: What do you mean by “basic life-tendency?”

Ikeda: It is the core nature or tendency of your life that you always return to. Everyday we are subject to many external causes and conditions that prompt various emotions and responses. We get angry, we laugh, we reflect. And our lives are always in a state of constant change.

Nevertheless, everyone has his or her own different life-tendency. For instance, there are people who are fundamentally angry by nature and always quick to lose their temper. There are people with weak life-force who are easily depressed, and people who live in the state of Bodhisattva and always think of others first. Our basic life-tendency is what

determines which of the Ten Worlds our lives will end up in after death.

Yumitani: That sounds pretty frightening!

Ikeda: After death, there are not the same external causes and conditions as there were in life, so that your life-tendency becomes your entire state of being. In life, even a person whose basic state is Hell, who is always suffering and for whom life itself is painful, may experience moments of joy or pleasure. But after death, such a person experiences only the state of Hell.

Ueda: That sure is a great motivation for doing our human revolution while we are still alive!

Ikeda: A person's basic life-tendency becomes most clear at the moment of death. A veteran nurse who has cared for the terminally ill and been with many of them in their final moments says: "It seems that at the end of life your entire life flashes before your eyes, like a movie. Not your becoming president of the company or succeeding in business or things like that, but what kind of a life you lived. Who you loved and were kind to, and how. In what ways you were callous or cruel. A sense of satisfaction at having lived according to your beliefs or a deep hurt at having betrayed them. All of what you were as a human being comes rushing at you. That is death."

Yumitani: Hearing that really makes one stop and think.

Ikeda: At that moment, neither fame nor money, knowledge or status can help you. Your friends and family cannot help you. You must face the truth of your self alone. Death is truly strict—it is uncompromising.

And the self that exists at that moment of death is the one that will continue throughout the state of death and beyond into the next life. 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.