

AN ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

‘The establishment of a correct view of life is the biggest challenge facing the 21st century,’ SGI President Ikeda writes. ‘Life is a continuous, unending cycle—in response to various causes and conditions, it alternately manifests states of emergence and latency.’

In the 1990s, I spoke twice at Harvard University. On both occasions, the city of Boston, one of the world’s great intellectual centers, was draped in the beautiful colors of autumn.

My first address was at the invitation of Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and took place a little after 6:00 p.m. on Sept. 26, 1991, at the school’s Weiner Auditorium. The theme of my address was “The Age of ‘Soft Power’ and Inner-Motivated Philosophy—For Developing a New Japan–U.S. Relationship.”

The second address was two years later on a lovely, sunny autumn day, a little after 4:30 p.m. on Sept. 24, 1993, at the Yenching Lecture Hall on the Harvard campus. On that occasion, I was jointly invited to speak by the Anthropology Department of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and the Department of Applied Theology of the Divinity School. I spoke on the topic of “Mahayana Buddhism and 21st Century Civilization.”

At the beginning of my second address, I argued that the establishment of a correct view of life is the biggest challenge facing the 21st century and outlined the Buddhist view wherein we embrace both life and death with joy. From the Buddhist perspective, I explained, life is a continuous, unending cycle—in response to various causes and conditions, it alternately manifests states of emergence and latency.

Just as we refresh ourselves through sleep to have energy for the coming day, death is a period of recharging ourselves for our next life. It is not something to be regarded with abhorrence but a blessing to be appreciated, just as we appreciate life. Deep faith enables us to experience joy in both life and death.

The response to my point was much greater than I expected. Dr. John Kenneth Galbraith, renowned economist and professor emeritus of Harvard University, one of the most esteemed scholars in Harvard’s long history, focused on this idea in his commentary after the lecture.

Dr. Harvey Cox, chairman of the Department of Applied Theology and currently Professor of Divinity at Harvard’s Divinity School, one of America’s leading scholars of religion, was equally impressed. He said in his commentary that I presented the audience with a unique view of death. Western society, he continued, tended to deny or euphemize death, and much could be learned from the concept of death that I outlined.

Recently, an American scholar who read my Harvard speech in a published volume of my university lectures, *A New Humanism*, wrote me a letter sharing his impressions. He said that he could understand life being joyful but that the concept of death being joyful was difficult to grasp. He asked me to explain its significance from the Buddhist viewpoint.



I once strolled around the Loire region of France with several French youth and visited the chateau where Leonardo da Vinci spent his last days. In the bedroom where this giant of the Renaissance died was a bronze plaque inscribed with his words “A well-filled day

brings good sleep. A well-filled life brings peaceful death.” A person who has lived a good life without regrets is not afraid of death.

What summit of joy, then, lies in store for those who dedicate their lives to working for people’s happiness, for justice and truth, in rhythm with the eternal law that governs all life and the universe?

Nichiren Daishonin tells us: “Continue your practice without backsliding until the final moment of your life, and when that time comes, behold! When you climb the mountain of perfect enlightenment and gaze around you in all directions, then to your amazement you will see that the entire realm of phenomena is the Land of Tranquil Light. The ground will be of lapis lazuli, and the eight paths will be set apart by golden ropes. Four kinds of flowers will fall from the heavens, and music will resound in the air. All Buddhas and bodhisattvas will be present in complete joy, caressed by the breezes of eternity, happiness, true self and purity. The time is fast approaching when we too will count ourselves among their number” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 761).

The Daishonin here describes the state of life of supreme joy found in the vibrant worlds of Buddhahood and Bodhisattva.



The French literary giant Victor Hugo writes, “We are all under sentence of death, but with a sort of indefinite reprieve.” No one can escape death. True philosophical inquiry begins with acknowledging and confronting the issue of death.

The Daishonin offers this encouragement to a man who has deepened his seeking mind toward Buddhism following a serious illness [in a letter to the man’s wife]: “Any minor offenses he [your husband] committed in this lifetime have probably already been eradicated, and the great evil of slander will also be extinguished because he has taken faith in the Lotus Sutra. If he were to go right now to Eagle Peak, he would be as delighted as if the sun had come out and he were able to see in all ten directions. He would rejoice, wondering how an early death could be so happy a thing. No matter what may happen on the road between this life and the next, he should declare himself to be a disciple of Nichiren” (WND, 938).

The true way of philosophy, the true way of mentor and disciple, is the way of eternal joy.



Death is the final accounting of our lives. In his “Treatise on Preparations for the Moment of Death,” Nichikan, the 26th high priest, writes that those who have slandered others and hurt others’ feelings will, at the moment of death, experience excruciating pain, as if they were being stabbed and slashed all over by sharp swords. The law of cause and effect manifests at the last moment of life in a strict manner.

The Daishonin asserts that no matter how powerful someone may have been while alive, when that person is “tormented by the wardens of hell, he is no different than a monkey on a string” (WND, 1026). In contrast, the noble lives of those who dedicate themselves to serving others will be rewarded and adorned with others’ gratitude, respect and admiration in direct proportion to all that they have done.

Speaking of what will await devoted practitioners of kosen-rufu when their lives come to a close, the Daishonin exclaims: “How can we possibly hold back our tears at the inexpressible joy of knowing that not just one or two, not just one hundred or two hundred, but as many as a thousand Buddhas will come to greet us with open arms!” (WND, 216–17).

What the Daishonin describes here corresponds to a state of life after death in which we

are folded in the embrace of the daimoku chanted in our memory by countless comrades in faith, the wonderful sound of daimoku resounding all around us.

Just as a glorious scarlet sunset heralds a brilliant new dawn, the majestic closing chapter to a life in which all desires have been fulfilled promises a next lifetime that brims with hope, good fortune and benefit.



Shichiro Goro, the youngest brother of Nanjo Tokimitsu, whose family made invaluable contributions to the propagation of the Daishonin's teachings, died at 16. He was a vital young man of fine appearance and friendly demeanor, and the Daishonin had great hopes for his future. He was the beloved child that his mother, the lay nun Ueno, had in her womb when his father died.

The Daishonin deeply lamented and mourned Shichiro Goro's death, and he assures the bereaved family again and again that the young man attained enlightenment without question. In the postscript of one of his letters, he writes, "Since he had profound faith in Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra, his death was also magnificent" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1568).

Even when it may seem that someone has died before their time or as a result of some unfortunate accident, there will still be clear proof that they have attained enlightenment. For example, their death may be deeply felt and regretted by many people. Or their surviving family members may be protected and flourish. When those family members carry on with strength and fortitude, the deceased person lives on staunchly in their hearts.

The Daishonin encourages Shichiro Goro's mother: "I hope that, if you, his loving mother, are thinking with longing about your son, you will chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and pray to be reborn in the same place as the late Shichiro Goro and your husband, the late Nanjo.

"The seeds of one kind of plant are all the same; they are different from the seeds of other plants. If all of you nurture the same seeds of Myoho-renge-kyo in your hearts, then you all will be reborn together in the same land of Myoho-renge-kyo. When the three of you are reunited there face to face, how great your joy will be!" (WND, 1074).

This is one of Buddhism's characteristics: a fabulous, only-dreamed-of realm of happiness unfolds from the deepest philosophical truths.

In the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings," the Daishonin states: "To regard birth and death with abhorrence and to try to escape them is delusion; it is the view that enlightenment is acquired. In contrast, to perceive birth and death as eternally inherent is awakening; it is the recognition of inherent enlightenment" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 754).

In "On Practicing the Buddha's Teachings," the Daishonin states that those who devote their lives to fighting against the three powerful enemies will be supported and safeguarded by countless heavenly deities—the protective forces of the universe—and will eventually reach the Buddha land of Eternally Tranquil Light.

In October 1993, a month after my second Harvard address, the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall in Hachioji was opened—almost 50 autumns after our first president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, died for his beliefs. It serves as a magnificent memorial to the life and achievements of Mr. Makiguchi, who was forced by Japan's militarist government to spend his last days in a tiny, oppressive prison cell. Day after day, month after month, warriors for kosen-rufu and distinguished guests from around the world gather at this hall. It is a palace where our founder's life lives on—a symbol of the joy found in both life and death.