BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (30)
THE ETERNITY OF LIFE

We often take our lives for granted—especially when we're young. We think we're going to live forever. But, from one moment to the next, nobody knows what will happen. A person could be alive and well one moment and dead the next.

Perhaps it was with sobering thoughts such as these that Nichiren Daishonin exhorted believers to "First study death, and then study other matters" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1404).

I've always found this quote intriguing. How exactly does one study death? After all, can anyone really say what happens when we die? Death is the "great unknown," and that's why it's so frightening. Furthermore, we perceive the inevitability of death long before it happens, which can be worrisome, even tormenting. This fear and suffering keeps us from thinking seriously about death and impedes our happiness.

Buddhism addresses the fundamental questions of life and death in a way that can alleviate if not erase the fear of death and the consequent suffering; it elucidates the eternity of life. In the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings" the Daishonin offers the following perspective: "Regarding life and death with abhorrence and trying to separate oneself from them is delusion, or partial enlightenment. To clearly perceive life and death as the essence of eternal life is realization, or total enlightenment. Now Nichiren and his disciples who chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo awaken to the ebb and flow of birth and death as the innate workings of life that is eternal" (GZ, 754).

In the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the eternity of life is expressed by the passage, "There is no ebb and flow of life and death, and there is no existing in this world and later entering extinction" (LS16, 226).

Though it is natural to see birth as a beginning and death as an end, this is an incomplete perspective. Buddhism teaches that we repeat the cycle of birth and death continuously. Death can be likened to sleep. We feel rejuvenated when we awake from a good night's rest. Similarly we can view death as a time to refresh our lives for our next existence. Death then, just like sleep, is not something to be feared.

The "Life Span" chapter clarifies that the Buddha's life is eternal and that we are in no way separate from the life of the Buddha. It describes the Buddha as life itself and defines that eternal life as the Mystic Law. By chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can experience the reality of the life-state of Buddhahood, not just learn it as a philosophical concept. Through this practice of chanting the Mystic Law we come to understand the oneness of life and death with our lives.

Although life is eternal, we must not stop striving to improve our circumstances in this lifetime simply because we can "wait for the next life." President Toda described rebirth as follows: "While our lives melt into the universe, they do not blend in with the lives of others. Each life retains its integrity and experiences joy and sadness depending on the person's actions while alive—as though crying or laughing in a dream" (*Lectures on the* "Expedient Means" *and* "Life Span" *Chapters of the Lotus Sutra*, vol. 3, p. 111).

It is fundamental to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism that cause and effect operates throughout past, present and future. Similarly our lives are continuous from existence to existence. The causes we've made in past existences are manifested as joy and suffering in this life, and the causes we make in the present shape our future. A carefree, live-for-the-moment attitude is living with perpetually missed opportunities; we will always be accountable for the

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causes we make.

Though it is preferable to die of old age, merely living a long life doesn't guarantee that it will be fulfilling. And measured against eternity, a short or long life makes little difference. What's important is that we each strive to live a life of quality based on a sense of mission.

Shakyamuni is said to have lived until the age of eighty. Nichiren Daishonin lived until he was sixty. Soka Gakkai President Makiguchi lived until seventy-three and Josei Toda, till fifty-eight. Though their life spans varied, each one dedicated himself without restraint for the sake of kosen-rufu. They fulfilled their respective missions and attained Buddhahood in life and death. In examining our own lives, regardless of the circumstances of our deaths, if we dedicate ourselves fully in our unique missions, we will likewise experience Buddhahood.

There may be times when peoples' deaths confuse us. In our attachment to the idea that living long is the deciding factor for a victorious life, we can become discouraged if someone we know and care for dies unexpectedly or doesn't live a long life. However, in *The New Human Revolution*, President Ikeda states: "Even if a person who practices this Buddhism should die young, his or her life would not have been in vain. That person's life and death will have profound meaning and will serve to teach something very important to those who remain" (*World Tribune*, August 17, 2001, p. 9). With faith, it is possible to discover this meaning. As we experience the death of loved ones, we can turn them into opportunities to learn about death in a way that will help us learn how to live.

The saying "To live well is to die well" takes on great meaning. Our challenge as Buddhists to improve ourselves is the correct way to live happy, fulfilled lives, and in doing so we are guaranteed that when our time comes we will die happy.

Too often we find ourselves putting off important matters precisely because we don't take death seriously. We find ourselves saying things like, "I'll practice Buddhism more devoutly when I've got more time." "I'll care for my health," or "I'll spend more quality time with my family and friends." Before we know it, years have passed and we find we have not kept any of these promises.

Buddhism teaches us to live and practice faith "with the profound insight that now is the last moment" of life. Imagine if we challenged ourselves to approach life with this attitude, how much more alive we would feel. How much more appreciation we would have for our very lives. How much more of ourselves we would invest in every opportunity to interact with other people. The efforts we make toward our own and other peoples' happiness based on the Mystic Law — be it reciting the sutra, making dinner, or offering a kind word to a stranger — would be joyful rather than burdensome. In making every moment count, we'll have lived a life without regret no matter when we die.

President Ikeda summarizes the importance of being true to ourselves succinctly: "Death will come to each of us some day. We can die having fought hard for our beliefs and convictions, or we can die having failed to do so. Since the reality of death is the same in either case, isn't it far better that we set out on our journey toward the next existence in high spirits with a bright smile on our faces, knowing that in everything we did, we did the very best we could, thrilling with the sense 'That was truly an interesting life'?" (*The Buddha in Your Mirror*, p. 202).

By Stephanie Celano, based on *Yasashii Kyogaku* (Easy Buddhist Study) published by *Seikyo Press* in 1994.

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