

DISCUSSIONS ON YOUTH BODHISATTVAS SHOW THE POWER OF BUDDHISM THROUGH THEIR STRUGGLES

‘Buddhism teaches the concept of deliberately choosing our circumstances,’ SGI President Ikeda explains. ‘This is where practitioners of the Mystic Law voluntarily choose to be born into painful situations, so they might demonstrate the power of Buddhism to others through their struggles and their subsequent triumphs.’

The conclusion of a four-part 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).

SGI President Ikeda: The good and evil energy that is engraved in one’s life does not vanish at death. We carry it with us into our next lifetime. Perhaps you can think of this phenomenon as similar to the principle of the conservation of energy taught in physics.

But Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism teaches us that we can change all such karma.

Yoshiko Ueda: Even immutable karma?

Ikeda: Yes. In fact, it is crucial that we change it. No matter what sufferings or hardships we may encounter, we must live bravely and strongly, challenging them until we triumph. The person who wins in the end is a true victor in life.

Victory is not decided halfway through. If we win in the end, we can look back on everything that has occurred up to that moment and realize that it all had a meaning. On the other hand, if we lose in the end, everything in our life will have been meaningless, no matter how smoothly things may have been going until then.

Teruhiko Yumitani: What about people who die of illness? Is that a sign of failure in life?

Ikeda: No. If a person has strong and invincible faith to the very end, he or she has triumphed. There are many people who, in spite of being fatally ill and suffering greatly themselves, have prayed for kosen-rufu and the happiness of their fellow members and encouraged others right up to the very moment of death. Their lives and their bravery in the face of death have given courage and inspiration to countless people. Such people will quickly be reborn with a healthy body.

I knew a young girl who was found to have a brain tumor when she was eleven. She died at fourteen. But through it all, she was so happy and cheerful. She even cheered up the adults in the hospital, sharing her bright, positive spirit with all whom she met. No doubt her illness caused her terrible pain, but she continued to chant and to encourage others.

When she was dying, she said to one of her last visitors: “I don’t care anymore about my illness or what happens to me. I’ve stopped praying for myself. There are so many others worse off than me. I pray with all my heart that they will take faith as soon as possible and find out for themselves just how wonderful the Gohonzon is.”

To her parents she said: “What if this had happened to you, Dad? We’d be in terrible trouble! And it would be just as bad if it happened to you, Mom. And if it happened to my

little brother, I'm sure he couldn't handle it. I'm glad that it happened to me instead of any of you.... I'm sure this is the result of a promise I made before I was born. If those who know me learn something from my life, I will be happy.”

I heard about this girl's struggle with illness, and I sent her roses. I also sent her a fan on which I had written the words, “Light of Happiness,” and a photograph I had taken of a field of irises in bloom. I heard that she was thrilled when she received them.

The words she left to those around her were “Faith means having faith until the very end.” And she demonstrated those words with her own life.

There was a long, long line at her funeral. In her brief 14-and-a-half years, she had told over a thousand people of the greatness of the Mystic Law.

That girl's name was Akemi Yamada, and she was from Kashiwa City, Chiba Prefecture, Japan. [She died in October 1982.] She triumphed. That is what I feel. Her entire life, all her suffering, had meaning. Or rather, through her own struggle, she succeeded in giving meaning to her suffering.

Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo – the eternal good medicine – is the greatest happiness.

Ikeda: Akemi said that her illness was the result of a promise she'd made before she was born. Buddhism teaches the concept of deliberately choosing our circumstances. This is where practitioners of the Mystic Law voluntarily choose to be born into painful situations, so they might demonstrate the power of Buddhism to others through their struggles and their subsequent triumphs. This is the way of life of a bodhisattva.

If everyone who had faith was perfectly blessed from the start, people would never know of the power of Buddhism. That is why some people voluntarily choose to be born in circumstances of profound suffering, so that they can show others what it means to do human revolution.

It is like a play, a great drama.

Ueda: So there can be meaning to a person's death, even if that person dies in an accident or of an illness.

Ikeda: All of us will die eventually. The crucial thing is how we have lived. It is important to live as long as we can, but length is not the measure of a good life. What matters most is what we have done with our lives. That is what determines whether it has been a good life or not.

Dr. Norman Cousins of the United States has said: “Death is not the greatest tragedy that befalls us in life. What is far more tragic is for an important part of oneself to die while one is still alive. There is no more terrifying tragedy than this. What is important is to accomplish something in life.”

Dr. Cousins was a great journalist and a peace activist. In his later years, he carried out pioneering work in the field of mind-body medicine, based on the conviction that the body and mind are one.

At any rate, the important thing is not whether our life is long or short. For those who practice the Daishonin's Buddhism, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—the eternal good medicine—while they are alive is itself the greatest happiness. And when they die, through their connection with Buddhism in this lifetime, they will return quickly to the

grand stage of kosen-rufu. It is just as if they take a short nap to rest, and then wake up again. The same is true of people who die in accidents.

Of course we mustn't lose our precious lives through our own carelessness. Thinking that we're safe from accidents just because we practice Buddhism is a kind of arrogance. Our correct attitude in faith should be to take extra precautions against accidents and illness precisely because we are practicing Buddhism.

The entire universe flows in the rhythm of life and death.

Yumitani: Suicide rates are high in Japanese society today.

Ikeda: Yes, they are high all around the world. This is very unfortunate. It is heartbreaking. People who kill themselves feel as if they have no way out. They don't have the strength to fight. They have nowhere to take refuge or find solace. But seeking escape in death does not end one's sufferings. In fact, by destroying the treasure that is your own life, you commit a grave offense that only adds further to your sufferings.

Suicides feel trapped and drained of vital life force. The reason they feel that way is that they are essentially living in opposition to the fundamental law of life, the Mystic Law. The entire universe flows in the rhythm of life and death. The largest star lives and dies, the smallest insect lives and dies. All phenomena move in the rhythm of life and death. The foundation of all life and death is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. That is why our life force grows weak if we go against the Mystic Law and grows strong if we practice the Mystic Law.

At any rate, suicide is always and absolutely wrong.

Yumitani: I know a person who was depressed and had lost her reason for living because her child had died, but thanks to the encouragement and support of fellow Soka Gakkai members, she has been able to make a new start in life.

Ikeda: We are a family of the Mystic Law. We are connected together by the "wireless communication system" of the Mystic Law, transcending life and death. Our daimoku always reaches our deceased loved ones. And, if we wish it, they can be reborn as family, or friends, or somewhere close by us.

The bereaved family members should be confident of that, and strive to lead the most happy and fulfilled lives. Their happiness is, in fact, eloquent testimony to the deceased's attainment of Buddhahood.

Yumitani: So the important thing is how those who have been left behind live the rest of their lives?

Ikeda: That's right. Buddhism expounds the oneness of life and death, and the oneness of parent and child. So if those family members who are still alive are happy, those who have died will move on a course to happiness, too. Similarly, if the family members who have died attain Buddhahood, they will be able—as part of the protective forces of the universe with which they have merged—to protect those of us, their family, who are still alive.

Ueda: We may not be able to directly comprehend what death is like, but we can get an

idea from life.

Ikeda: That is possible. We cannot scientifically prove what the state after death is like. But if we practice Buddhism and receive clear actual proof of the validity of its teachings while we're alive, it makes sense for us to accept Buddhism's teachings on what happens after death as well.

Yumitani: If the teachings of Buddhism weren't true, our members wouldn't see that proof demonstrated in their lives, but they do.

Ikeda: We have all put this practice to the test, and all of us in the same way have obtained some form of actual proof that it works. That means that some kind of fixed law or principle is in action.

The foundation of all Buddhist teachings is a view of life as eternal. If this foundation were wrong, we wouldn't have actual proof of Buddhism's effectiveness while we are alive.

Youth must spread the philosophy of the sanctity of life.

Yumitani: There are many people, though, who say that it is impossible to prove the existence of life after death, and that we can only know what death is like by dying.

Ikeda: Well that's true—you *can* only know what death is like by dying. But what are you going to do if, after you die, you find out that Buddhism was right? It will be too late to change your life then!

Ueda: Yes, it's all over!

Yumitani: Even if, just supposing, there were no life after death, all your efforts to perfect yourself through Buddhist practice still wouldn't be wasted, because you'd end up a better person and leading a fulfilled life. Either way, you'd still come out ahead! If we think of this as a bet, it's the best bet going!

Ikeda: Buddhism is absolutely not mistaken about life and death. Science is not almighty; there are many things it can't prove. In particular, modern natural science excels at researching things within the realm of the five senses, but it has no means for inquiring into those things beyond that realm.

Yumitani: Science has no means to investigate life after death.

Ikeda: Therefore, the proper scientific attitude should be to withhold judgment about things that one doesn't understand. Both Goethe and Tolstoy said the same thing. So did Gandhi. Science has no authority to declare whether life exists after death or not.

Yumitani: To declare without proof that life after death does not exist is arrogant.

Ikeda: Yes, it is a tremendous error. No other age has been so intent on refusing to face

the fact of death and so ardent in pursuing worldly desires as this age of science, the twentieth century. It has seen two world wars and a nuclear arms race carrying the threat of global annihilation. We cannot possibly hope to find a basis for respect for the sanctity of life in a view of life and death that maintains there is no life after death and that human beings are nothing but aggregations of matter.

That is why I want you, the youth, to study and spread the philosophy of the sanctity of life around the world so as to make the 21st century a century of peace. I want you to study the correct view of life and death, base your actions on it, and regard each and every day as a precious, irreplaceable treasure. I want you to fill your life with hundreds of years' worth of value and lead an invincible existence, the legacy of which will shine on brightly for all time.

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