

**BACK TO THE BASICS
THE FOUR KALPAS
BY JOHN KASAHARA
NORTHEASTERN ZONE, STUDENT DIVISION LEADER**

It is natural to wonder about the value of learning Buddhist concepts such as the four kalpas—formation, continuance, decline and disintegration. Certainly such knowledge alone does not guarantee us a happy life. So why struggle to understand a seemingly obscure term like this?

The point is that by understanding how time, the world in which we live and our lives in general evolve, we can take each moment of life more seriously and further grasp the concept of cause and effect—thereby taking control of and shaping our destiny. Understanding the four kalpas can actually empower us to live better lives.

The four kalpas are the four periods of time that a world is said to repeatedly undergo. But to understand this, first we must understand what a kalpa is. There are said to be three kinds of measurable kalpas: small, medium and large. One explanation sets the length of a small kalpa at approximately 16 million years. According to Buddhist cosmology, each of the four stages lasts for 20 small kalpas, which equals one medium kalpa. Finally, one complete cycle forms a large kalpa. Thus, when we talk about the four kalpas, we are talking about huge pieces of time.

The world first takes shape and is occupied by living beings in the kalpa of formation. Living beings continue to inhabit the world in the kalpa of continuance. In the kalpa of decline, the first 19 small kalpas see sentient beings gradually disappear. In its 20th small kalpa, fire, water or wind destroys the world. Finally, the kalpa of disintegration lasts from the annihilation of a world at the end of the last kalpa of decline to the formation of a new world. The cycle then begins again.

On the individual level, these four kalpas can be thought of as corresponding to our four sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death. Every human life goes through a four-stage process of formation (birth), continuance (aging), decline (sickness) and disintegration (death). And the cycle then begins again. That is what is most interesting to me about the four kalpas—they are an eternal cycle. It is not as if the world and all living beings come to an irrevocable end at some final kalpa that happens millions of years from now. It is an ongoing cycle, just as our own lives are. We are born into this world, experience all there is to experience, at some point die and are then reborn.

The real message of the four kalpas, then, is one of hope: Life continues forever. The universal life has no end. And our lives, which are encompassed by and permeate the universe, are endless, too. As Nichiren Daishonin says in the “Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings”: “To hate life and death and try to separate oneself from them is delusion or partial enlightenment. To perceive life and death as essential is enlightenment or total realization. Now, when Nichiren and his disciples chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, they know that life and death are intrinsic workings of the fundamental essence. Being and non-being, birth and death, appearance and disappearance, worldly existence and future extinction—all are essential and everlasting processes” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 754).

By chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, we develop a deep understanding of these “essential and everlasting processes,” allowing us to live with great confidence. We can go through whatever we have to face without fear, at the same time making the most of each moment. We know that our lives start the entire cycle over again after the period of death.

We will continue our eternal journey of faith, proving the greatness of the Mystic Law in lifetime after lifetime, as we continue to accumulate inexhaustible good fortune. The four kalpas are about the adventure of our life itself.