

DHARMA ESSAY

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(Chapter III)

BIRTH AND DEATH

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BIRTH AND DEATH

Immortal Identity

We are holding the annual *Obon* Memorial Service. This is the time of the year that we celebrate the reunion of the deceased and the living. We, living beings, are mortal physically, but we are eternal spiritually. All physical bodies are mortal, but one's real life is eternal. When we die, our bodies will be dissolved into five elements: soil, water, heart, air, and space. For instance, when we die, breathing stops. Dehydration soon starts. The body's temperature will go down. Cremation or interment will change the dead body to ashes or soil. When one dies a void results, thus establishing a more physical space in our environment. Our physical bodies came from the five elements of soil, water, heart, air, and space. When we die, our bodies will go back to the five elements. This five story pagoda here represents the five elements of the universe.

We repeat birth and death many times. During the cycle of birth and death, we are supposed to pursue universal truth and act on it. We eventually will be enlightened and become Buddhas.

What part of our being becomes a Buddha after the cycle of birth and death? It is our 'spirit'. The Buddha teaches that our 'spirit' existed in the past, exists now, and will exist in the Future. Therefore, our identity is eternal.

There is an intermediate existence between the past and the present, and the present and the Future. The intermediate existence is like a ghost, so we cannot see the identity. It is said that the term of the intermediate existence is for 49 days, but I think that the length depends on one's karma. It may be much longer, years or even decades. During that time, the identity stays in the spiritual realm without any form.

Before we are born, conception must occur. It occurs when the three identities of father, mother, and child meet. When the karma's of the father, mother, and child match, conception occurs.

Your parents, grandparents, and ancestors are all interwoven with you to form your identity.

This is the reason why the *Obon* Services and memorial services are important. When you neglect your ancestors, you neglect yourself. You should not neglect them or yourself. *Obon* Service is to take good care of all of your ancestors' identities as well as your own identity. The more often you take part in these services, the higher the levels in the spiritual realm your ancestors will be. Then, they will have more power to protect you.

Born in This World with a Purpose

(LOTUS #21, March/April, 1998)

Why were we born? Some people say, "It was not my wish to be born. My parents gave birth to me." I used to say these words, too. But the more I read the Lotus Sutra, the more I believed that one was born due to his or her own wish and karma.

The reason I say this is because it comes from Chapter Two, "Hoben-pon" of the Lotus Sutra. In this chapter, there are phrases explaining the reasons why the Buddha and Sariputra (one of the great ten disciples of the Buddha) desired to be reborn together in the future life.

"The Coming of the Buddha" of The Lotus Sutra says that the Buddha was born in this world in order to purify all beings by having them open the treasury of the Buddha-wisdom, to show the Buddha-wisdom to them, to have them understand what the Buddha-wisdom is, and to lead them into the path of the Buddha-wisdom. That was the sole reason why the Buddha was born in this world.

"The Buddha-wisdom" means "Reality of this world in the Buddha's point of view." In other words it means to realize the real meaning of life for us to be born and to live.

In the same chapter of the sutra, it also states, "I (the Buddha) wish all living beings to be no different from myself." The Sakyamuni Buddha was born in this world for us to attain the same Enlightenment as his.

The sutra reveals that Sakyamuni Buddha and Sariputra had lived in the same era in their former lives and practiced Buddhism together. At the deathbed of Sariputra, he wished himself to be reborn in the same era with his master and to practice the Buddha Dharma again. In the present life Sariputra has completely forgotten his own wish, but the Buddha reminded him of it in Chapter Two of the sutra. Both of them were born in this world during the same era with this purpose.

I believe that all of us (whatever our circumstances) were born with a purpose depending on our own former wishes and karma. We have different skills and talents, but we continue to live in mutual existence in order to fulfill our purpose.

We can compare the sufferings of people to an ore that contains various minerals such as gold, silver, iron, etc. If we refine the ore, we may obtain pure metal like gold. The pure gold can be compared to the Buddha, or one who has removed all sufferings. The pure gold can be used for various purposes such as a ring, a coin, or a crown. Likewise each one of us, although we have different skills, talents, and jobs, are useful to others by performing different tasks. It is one of the reasons why we are born and why we are living now.

All of us are important for the harmony of all living beings and for the happiness of others. The Buddha was born in this world to have us to realize the Reality of Mutual Existence.

The Virtue of Holding Memorial Services (At the time of a memorial service)

Buddhists, especially Japanese Buddhists have many services in remembrance of their ancestors and loved ones such as the Spring Higan in March, Obon in July, Autumn Higan in September, and Perpetual Memorial Service in November.

In addition to these, many families observe several individual yearly services for their ancestors and deceased loved ones.

These services generally are held to show our appreciation to them, for without them we would not exist today. We also pray that they will move up to a higher spiritual level themselves spiritually by listening to our chanting.

Mahayana Buddhists, especially Nichiren Buddhists, pray for salvation in attaining Enlightenment for the people in this life as well as for the souls of the deceased. Many individuals go to a temple, chant the sutra, and listen to the sermon. However, some people do not understand or practice the teachings of Nichiren Shonin. Although some may attain Enlightenment during the chanting or listening to the sermon, they may still go back to being ordinary people once they step out of the temple. These individuals may not attain Buddhahood, the liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Therefore, it is necessary for individuals to chant the sutra, study Buddhism, and help others in order to reach a higher level of Enlightenment for the individual and the souls of their deceased loved ones. Then there will be less suffering for them and the protecting power from our ancestors increase.

According to the Lotus Sutra, those not faithful to the teachings of the sutra will fall into the three lowest realms of existence: Rage or hell, Devouring or hungry spirit, and Stupidity or animal. The Nichiren Sect, in this case, offers a *segaki* memorial service, especially for the hungry or evil spirits. Other times, we offer *toba*. The name of the deceased is written under the Odaimoku on the front of it and a Buddhist scripture and the donor's name is on the back. We can send messages from the Lotus Sutra to the dead and save them in order to free them from the lower realms. Of course the *toba* offering is not limited for the souls in the lowest realms, but it is a message of the scripture to the soul of the dead.

When a memorial service is held, it is important for the living members of the family (the grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren and others) to attend this service. The names and information of some of the deceased may not be familiar to the family members; however, with the passage of time they can learn about their ancestors. They will learn about their roots and the importance of the family in terms of who and what they are today.

Thus memorial services are important practice not only for Buddhists but for everyone.

The Seventh Day Services

As in the legal court system for anyone accused (guilty or not) of unlawful acts, so too the living are judged at death.

According to tradition a trial for the deceased in Buddhism will be held only seven times which is every seventh day after one's death. So the seventh day services are like the trial to defend the dead. In Buddhism there are seven prosecutors. Each prosecutor holds court for one day only. In other words, seven prosecutors holds one every seventh day.

There are five precepts in Buddhism: not to kill, not to steal, not to tell a lie, not to commit adultery, and not to be drunk. Each prosecutor has a record of conduct committed according to the five precepts and holds a court for each precept every seventh day. King Emma is the most famous among them. He has a very dreadful face and carries a pair of big scissors to cut the tongue of a liar. It is said that Emma has a huge record book about each person's conduct like a black box on an airplane. Emma reads the record, "You did such a wrong deed; therefore, you must go to the *Avichi hell*." Even if the dead tries to defend him or herself, the wrong conduct is shown up on a screen like seeing a video of his or her own life.

The way to defend the deceased is to have a memorial service and to chant the Buddhist scriptures, and to talk something good about the dead. Compared to the seven prosecutors, there are many defendants. There are Buddhist priests who read the Lotus Sutra and chant the Sacred Title - *Odaimoku*, bereaved family, friends, and lay believers who pray and chant. On the fifth seventh day, the Buddha reveals the reasons why the person has broken the precept, but the Buddha never judges him or her but just reveals truth. The Buddha forgives sinful people but never judges them.

Well, then, how to recompense one's crime and sins? The most important recompense is to repent one's wrong conduct. If he or she can not repent their wrong conduct, in the next life he or she will receive the same sufferings which he or she has given to others. It is the law of Karma - cause and effect. As we sow, we must reap.

On the 49th day, the deceased decides where to go just as we choose our place to live according to our karma; our status, job, financial matter, education for the children, and so forth.

We are gathered here to have the last seventh day service for the Late...(name withheld)... Let us speak some thing good about him/her and pray for him/her to rest in peace or to be born to a better place.

Memorial Service Prayer

Oh, Thou, the Buddha, the Supremely Awakened One, the Most Honored One, here we are gathered to hold in this Memorial Service Thy presence with deepest reverence and adoration in our hearts.

We hereby offer our merits accumulated by chanting the Lotus Sutra and the Odaimoku, Namu Myoho Renge Kyo, to the Late Mrs. ...(name withheld)... who passed away at the one day short of years old on It is the 1st -- 7th Day Memorial Service for the spirit of the Late ...(name withheld)... in order to have her partake of the joy of the Dharma.

May she stop suffering, leave the world of birth and death, and dwell in the world given to her as the reward for her good karmas, receive our offering of the savor of the Dharma, eliminate grave sins which she might have committed from the past, see the Buddhas of the worlds of the ten directions, hear the Wonderful Dharma, develop virtues of the Buddha, travel over the Dharma-world by this Vehicle of The Lotus Sutra, reach the place of Enlightenment quickly, and attain Enlightenment. May the soul of the Late ...(name withheld)... rest on the Lotus Blossoms and attain Supreme Enlightenment.

May the whole Dharma-world be blessed with the Great Compassion of the Buddha Sakyamuni.

May all beings be Blessed with this merit, and with us together, attain Buddhahood.

Importance at the Time of Death

(LOTUS #5, July/August, 1995)

"My husband had chanted "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo" all day and night. At the time of his death, he loudly chanted the O'Daimoku twice. His skin was also whiter than he had been while he was alive. His facial expression did not change even after he was gone." This quotation was a part of a letter sent to Nichiren Shonin from his disciple, Myoho Ama Gozen.

Nichiren answered back, "You can tell whether the soul of the dead will go to heaven, to be born as a human being, or go to hell depending on the appearance of the last hours of one's life and on the appearance soon after death. According to scriptures, the white denotes that he or she will be born in heaven. The black means that they will repeat the cycle of birth and death. Therefore, your husband is surely to be born in heaven."

St. Nichiren then quoted Chapter 21 of the Lotus Sutra, "The person who keeps this sutra after my (Buddha Sakyamuni's) extinction will be able to attain the enlightenment of the Buddha definitely and doubtlessly." He wrote to her that her husband would surely be born in heaven.

In Nichiren Buddhism, priests consider the funeral service the utmost important task to confront the problem of death and of a possible transformation beyond death. Consciousness will continue or be carried on even after one's death. If the dead has not realized his or her own death, he or she will be bound to this earthly world.

There is an intermediate state of the soul after one's death until the soul of the dead is reborn again in the spiritual world. This state lasts for 49 days. During this period, the soul must sufficiently loosen his or her attachment to earthly matters; otherwise, the soul will not go to the spiritual realm. In order to avoid this, the priest reads the scripture and repeatedly tells the soul that he or she has passed away. The Nichiren Shu priest reads the *Indo-mon* during a funeral service.

The content of the *Indo-mon* is as follows:

First, facing the *Gohonzon*, the officiant requests the appearance of the Eternal Buddha Sakyamuni and Bodhisattva Nichiren. Then, the officiant of the service tells the Buddha and the Bodhisattva the person's name and age and the date of the death. At this time, a Buddhist name is formally given to the dead according to the state of his or her faith, devotion to Nichiren Buddhism, and the contributions made to society while the person was alive. The priest asks the Buddha and Saint Nichiren to lead the soul to the Buddha Land, Mount Sacred Eagle.

Then, facing the deceased, the officiant tells, "You passed away on ---at the age of ---. Now you have departed from your earthly body. Your soul, which has no material body, it is the same with the eternal Buddha. You are going back to the original home of the Eternal Buddha. You must realize that your physical body is gone, but your spirit is

alive. I am going to read the Lotus Sutra and the words of St. Nichiren, so listen well."

According to the words of Nichiren Dai'Shonin, it is said that there is a river between this world and the other world, and this scripture called the Lotus Sutra will become a boat for you to cross the river. Or it is said that there is a needle mountain after one's death, and this sutra will be the vehicle to ride into the other worlds. Or, it is also said that there is complete darkness, and this sutra will light your path to the Mount Sacred Eagle. I, Nichiren, shall wait for you at the gate of the northeast."

After the quotation, the priest says to the soul that your immediate family and relatives, and friends are all here to offer incense and bid you farewell. Therefore, you must go now to Mount Sacred Eagle."

This is the content of the *Indo-mon*. It is a scripture reading for the deceased, so he or she may move on to the spiritual realm.

Nichiren Buddhist priests do not say that the soul will be born in the Pure Land or Buddha Land. This is because the ultimate goal of Buddhists is to attain the highest Enlightenment, or in other words, to stop the cycle of birth and death. Once you are born, you must die, because if there is a beginning, there must be the end. It is true even if you were born in heaven or the Buddha Land; you are naturally subjected to death, though the length of one's life in heaven or Buddha Land may be much longer than in this world.

Therefore, the priest reads the *Indo-mon* saying, "You must move on now to the Mount Sacred Eagle." It is the place where the Eternal Buddha and Bodhisattva Nichiren are preaching the Lotus Sutra in the spiritual realm.

Those who wish the funeral service to be held according to the Nichiren Buddhist rite, I recommend you become a member and pay membership dues regardless if you are young or old. One's life is uncertain especially in these days as you watch mishaps on television everyday. Those who do not decide which church to go to are the people who may have lost the map that leads to the treasure.

Aging and Death

Discussion on aspects of preparing for a dignified death is very important although ordinary people do not like to talk about death.

In Buddhism, the relationship of the body and spirit is often compared with the relationship of a car and its owner. We have acquired a new car when our cars begin to cause us problems and become useless.

I wonder how many cars you have owned before your present car. My first car was an International pick-up truck. I used the truck for my side job of gardening and to raise my family in Salt Lake City, Utah. My second car was a 1974 Chevy Nova. Then, my family which still owns a 1982 Honda Civic and a 1992 Subaru GL10 station wagon. My children are driving them in Seattle, WA. My family is talking about buying a new car after the old one stops functioning. The spirit must discard the human body due to age and illness. The spirit-essence then will seek and find another body to dwell in. Here, rebirth will probably take place. But in the case of human beings, it is more complicated than in the case of a car and its owner.

Life after death is stated in Buddhist scriptures and in books concerning the psychic and hidden side of our lives.

These books state that there is nothing to be afraid of. "At the point of death, the 'soul' rises into a wonderful, almost indescribably beautiful state of bliss. The first awareness is of a brilliant light and heavenly music. Then, the person seems to be enveloped in love. The sense of love and loving presence is beyond anything you could imagine here on the earth. The Late ...(name withheld)... might have had the same experience while I was visiting her and chanting our Buddhist scriptures a few hours before her death.

On my visits to the nursing homes, I often discuss subjects from Buddhist scriptures to psychic books. I tell the aging men and women that one should not be afraid of dying, but also that it is not a place that one should hurry to. I try to tell them that suicide is a worse way to die because it may affect his or her life after death.

Many people feel quite hopeless when they grow older. Bringing forth the Buddhist view, I tell them to learn anything that interests them. Whatever one learns today, they will take with them to the next life. Genius' do not pop up out of the clear blue sky. Somewhere in their previous lives they obtained the knowledge to have an exceptional high I.Q. Therefore, in the Future life, one has the potential to be a genius using karma to one's advantage. Having this hope of improvement, we are able to live meaningful lives even in our advanced ages.

Although I could not discuss much about these subjects with ...(name withheld)... while she was in the Keiro Nursing Home, I believe that she had already understood them because she was not afraid of death. She had just waited for the time to say good-bye to ...(name withheld)....

Let us say "Good bye, grandma. Rest in peace."

Services after One's Death

(LOTUS #11, July/August, 1996)

Last month, ministers of the Los Angeles Buddhist Federation and staff from two Japanese mortuaries had a meeting regarding funeral arrangements and other matters concerning funerals. During the meeting, I realized that I must explain to all members and friends of the Nichiren Buddhist Temple the meaning of services after one's death such as a bed side service or *makura-kyo*, a keeping vigil service or *tsuya*, scripture reading to lead the soul or *indo-mon*, the first seventh day service or *shonanoka* and the 49th day *shiju-kunichi ki* service.

Recently, a counselor of a mortuary suddenly called me and said, "A person passed away on such a day. The family of the dead is here. They want to have the funeral at such an hour on such a day. How is your schedule?" We, ministers, do not like this type of call. Not only Buddhist priests but also Christian clergy are complaining about this kind of call." Therefore, the ministers had a meeting with the funeral directors.

When one of your family member dies, call your minister first before you call a funeral home. I suggest you call me even before that. You should call me before the death occurs.

The chanting at the death-bed is called *Rinju-no-okyo*. It is a service for the dying person to awake in truth of life and death and not to leave any attachment to this material world. You may think the dying person is unconscious and is not able to hear, but this is not so. Sense of hearing remains for a while even after the heart stops beating. For example, paramedics told the mother to call the name of the son who was found at the bottom of a swimming pool. Calling the son's name and chanting O'Daimoku while the paramedics were trying to bring his breath back, the boy revived again. He is healthy, wise, and in his 20s now.

Going back to services after one's death, *makura-kyo* is the first service to be held after one's death. It should be held at the bedside of one's dead body. *Makura* means pillow. *Makura-kyo* is supposed to be held before undertakers take the body away from a hospital or a home. This is one of the reasons why you should call your temple first before you call an undertaker. In a case where a body has already gone to a mortuary, you should still call a minister to have a *Makura-kyo* service when you go to the mortuary to arrange a funeral.

The second service is called *O'Tsuya*. It was originally held the night of someone's death. *O'Tsuya* means to sit up all night. Members of the surviving family take turns sitting up all night at the bedside of the dead and to keep incense and candles burning, so that the dead would not feel lonesome. In America, the dead body will be taken away from a hospital or a home within a few hours. Therefore, people do not practice sitting

up all night, but you should hold an *O'Tsuya* service at the convenience of the family and a priest at the home of the dead.

A funeral arrangement should be discussed at this time soon after the *O'Tsuya* together with the surviving family, relatives, friends, minister, and the funeral director. This is another reason to call your minister first before calling a funeral home.

Indo-mon is the most important part of a funeral in Nichiren Buddhist rites. It is a reading of the Lotus Sutra and St. Nichiren's letters for the soul of the dead to be led into the Buddha Land in the spiritual realm. A Buddhist name is given during the funeral service in spite of the dead one's first, middle, and surname. The funeral service will be followed by a cremation or burial service.

After the funeral, the 7th Day services will be held until *shijuku-nichi* or 49th Day Service. These services signify the seven trials of the dead are said to be held. Speaking something good about the dead and the chanting voice are for the soul to go to the Buddha Land just like an attorney defending his client. Please keep these Buddhist customs in your mind and call your minister first before you call a mortuary when a family member passes away.

A Guide in the Region of the Dead

(LOTUS #33, March/April, 2000)

Nichiren Dai'Shonin says in a letter to Yagenta, "The Lotus Sutra is a cane for all Buddha candidates. You should rely on me as a cane or a pillar. If you use a cane when you climb a mountain, you will not fall. Especially if I pull you by my hands, you will never fall. The O'Daimoku, "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo," will become a cane or a pillar to support you after your death. Sakyamuni Buddha, Taho Buddha, and the four great Bodhisattvas will come to you to pull you up by their hands. If I am gone before you, I shall come to welcome you."

The above quotation is one of my favorites. I read it at a funeral or the 49th Day Memorial Service. The quotation is a part of a letter from St. Nichiren to Yagenta Hojo who was a *samurai* warrior in the Kamakura Government. He was sickly, so he kept quiet and enjoyed reading books. He later became a lay priest.

Under the circumstances, one day he sent his swords to Nichiren Shonin and asked him to cut the devils of his illness with the swords and to pray for his quick recovery.

Nichiren Dai'Shonin replied to him, "These swords you were carrying are the devil's swords, but the ones you offered to the Lotus Sutra will become canes for you to climb the mountain to Buddhahood. Rely on these canes!"

The other day, I conducted a Forty-ninth Day Memorial Service for a person who died in Japan. The funeral was conducted in the Shinto religion, but at the request of his daughter, I had the memorial service for him. According to her, "The funeral of the dead person's wife was held at the Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple 27 years ago. Her Buddhist name was also given to her at that time. She was a devoted Nichiren Shu member and chanted the Lotus Sutra and O'Daimoku every morning and night. She died by having a heart-attack while chanting the sutra. The couple was separated for many years before her death; however, she was always saying that he would come back for her for sure. That is the reason why I wanted at least to have a memorial service for him in the same temple where my mother's funeral service was conducted."

After the 49th Day Service, the lady again told us the following story with excitement: "During the chanting, I sensed that my mother appeared and pulled the hand of my father who looked so embarrassed with feeling of "Are you sure it is all right to go with you?"

I thought it was a very good experience. Many days before the memorial service, I gave him a Buddhist name, "*kaku-mu*" for him to awake from a dream and to attain Buddhahood using a word from his wife's Buddhist name, "*Jo-kaku*," which means Attained Enlightenment Always.

A person who is not a follower of Nichiren Dai'Shonin such as him would also be able to go to the Buddha Land with assistance of O'Daimoku. Those who have faith and chant the O'Daimoku daily will surely be able to meet Sakyamuni Buddha, Taho Buddha, the

four great Bodhisattvas, and Nichiren Shonin at the time of their death.

The Spring *Higan* Memorial Service will be held at our temple on March 26th, 2000. Let us pray for our loved ones to meet with Sakyamuni Buddha, Taho Buddha, the four great Bodhisattvas, and Nichiren Shonin in the region of the dead. Sooner or later we must go there, too. Let us chant "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo" to be sure to meet them shining with the rays of the O'Daimoku.

Scripture Reading for the Dead (*Indo-mon*)

The indo-mon is one of the most important recitations during a funeral in Nichiren Buddhism. It is the scripture that leads the spirit of the deceased to the spiritual realm or the Buddha Land.

Have you ever heard of a book called, **The Tibetan Books of the Dead**? According to the book, Tibetan Buddhist priests read their scriptures in front of a dead body for 49 days before a funeral. During this period, the family of the dead cannot see the body.

The Tibetan priests and I believe there is an *intermediate state* after one's death until the soul of the dead is reborn in the spiritual world. It is said that this state lasts for 49 days. During this period, the spirit must sufficiently loosen his or her attachment toward earthly matters; otherwise, the spirit will not go to the Buddha Land. In order to avoid that, the Tibetan priests read the scriptures and repeatedly tell the 'soul' that he or she has passed away.

The *Indo-mon*, which I have read in front of the casket, is the same as that of the Tibetan texts. The difference is that they read the scripture for 49 days whereas I read the *Indo-mon* only once during the funeral. But every morning during my morning service, I will pray for the spirit of the Late(name withheld).... to rest in peace until the 49th day.

Now, I will explain what I have read in the *Indo-mon*. First, I requested the appearance of the Eternal Buddha Sakyamuni and Saint Nichiren, the founder of the Nichiren Buddhist Sect. Next, I tell them that the Late(name withheld).... has passed away at the age of (age) on (date of death) .

I have given him/her the Buddhist name of (Buddhist name). Then, facing the deceased, I said, "You, (name), passed away on (date of death) . Now you have departed from your earthly body. Your spirit, which has no material body, is the same as that of the Eternal Buddha. You are going back to your original home of the Eternal Buddha. You must realize that although your physical body is gone, your spirit is alive. I am going to read some scriptures of the Buddha and the words of St. Nichiren so listen well and think about it deeply." Thus I continued talking to his/her soul. According to the words of St. Nichiren, it is said that if there is a river between this world and the spiritual realm, and that this scripture called the Lotus Sutra will become a boat for one to cross the river. Or it is said that if there is a mountain, which the dead has to climb up, this sutra will be the vehicle to ride into the spiritual realm. Or else, it is said where there is complete darkness, and this sutra will light your path to the Buddha Land. I quoted St. Nichiren's words, "I, Nichiren, shall wait for you at the gate of the spiritual realm."

I continued to talk to him/her after the quotation by saying, "Your children, grand children, great grand children, and relatives, and friends are all here to offer incense and flowers and bid you farewell. Therefore, you must go now to the Buddha Land."

Salvation from the Cycle of Birth and Death

(LOTUS #41, July/August, 2001)

The aim of Buddhism is salvation from the cycle of birth and death, which is called "Attaining Buddhahood" or "Nirvana."

Rebirth means that one has not attained Buddhahood and that one is born in one of the six worlds such as realms of Hell, Hungry Spirits, Animals, *Asura*, Human, and Heaven. The three worse worlds are Hell, Hungry Spirits, and Animals. Once we fall into these three terrible realms, it is very hard to get out of it for many lives. Nichiren Dai'Shonin says that even if you kill an ant, your soul will fall into hell; however, the *Segaki* memorial service is a way to save the souls from these terrible worlds. The *Segaki* memorial service could be held at any time of the year, but it is very popular to hold it during the *Obon* season, which is July or August.

St. Nichiren teaches us that only the faith in the Lotus Sutra will save the souls and living beings from the cycle of the birth and death in the six realms. Kingo Shijo, one of the most devoted followers of Nichiren Shonin, requested his master to hold a *Segaki* memorial service for his mother's one year memorial anniversary and sent him various offerings of food and money. He also asked the meaning of the *Segaki*.

His master replied in a letter, "The *Obon Segaki* Memorial Service originated at the time of Sakyamuni Buddha when Maudgalyayna's mother, who had been starving in hell, was saved. At first he could not save his mother because he had not practiced the Lotus Sutra. However, he listened to the Buddha preaching the Lotus Sutra at Mt. Sacred Eagle. He then practiced the teaching of the sutra and chanted "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo," and thus attained Buddhahood and became Tamalapattra-candana-Fragrance Tathagata. As a result his mother also became a Buddha."

As you read the above sacred words, Nichiren Shonin ensures that Kingo Shijo's mother is together with Buddha Sakyamuni, Taho Buddha, and many Buddhas from the ten quarters because she was a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra. He also praised Kingo Shijo for his devotion to his mother and the sutra.

Chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra says, "It is difficult to keep this sutra. I (Buddha Sakyamuni) shall be glad to see anyone keeping it even for a moment. So will all the other Buddhas. He will be praised by all the Buddhas."

Let us practice the faith of the Lotus Sutra like Kingo Shijo and his mother, Nun Myoho.

Funeral Message

The Late ...(name withheld)...had been saying that he would come to this temple while he was healthy. But he did not have a chance to do so since I was installed as the head minister of the temple, last September. Tonight, he finally had a chance to come for his own funeral.

You may probably attend many funerals each year. But you may think, "My turn will not come for many years." I also believe that my turn may not come for a few decades and I wish that my turn may not come forever.

St. Nichiren, the founder of Nichiren Buddhism said, "One's life is uncertain. Even if you exhale, you are not sure that you can inhale next. The wise and the fool, the young and the old, are under the law of the transient life. Therefore, one should always know that death comes to everyone and should accept it solemnly and spend the valuable life meaningfully."

He said that you must have a valuable life, meaningfully. One of the meaningful parts of life for you is to go to your church or to come to this temple. Buddhists seek for Enlightenment which means not to have attachment. We see many funeral notices in the paper everyday. We are not sad to see the notice if they are not related to us. But we suffer from grief of the death of close relative and friend.

The immediate family and close friends gathered here tonight in grief. To be in the state of grief for a long time will not lead you to enlightenment, but when you are sad, it is better for you to be sad. But while you are in grief, try to see yourself and to know yourself, and know that one's life is uncertain. To realize that life is uncertain is to attain Enlightenment.

I believe that (a name of a person)..... knew that he would die and knew that he had to prepare for the matter after his own death. He was a little late, but it is all right. He does not need to worry. Your wife, (his wife's name) will take care of that. She had promised me yesterday.

Abortion and a Memorial Service for the Unborn Babies

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A doctor told his patient; "You have only one choice: Have a baby or save your life." These parents had to think it over again and again. They already had two children. The mother had to raise them. But she decided; "I am not healthy anyway. Even if I was alive, I do not know how many years I will live. This baby has a future. I would like to put my hope in the unborn baby." As a result, the baby was born, but the twenty-nine year old mother died twelve days after the delivery. Thus, she left the newly born infant and two little children. If the doctor performed an artificial termination of pregnancy (abortion), I, Shokai Kanai, would not be alive today.

In this election year for the President of the United States, abortion is one of the key issues. The two major party contenders are as divided on the abortion issue as are the justices. The Republican, Texas Governor George W. Bush, voiced dismay over the 1973 abortion ruling and pledged to reverse the abortion law, if elected. He would allow abortion only in cases of rape, incest or to save the life of the mother, according to the Los Angeles Times. Taking the opposite view is Vice President Al Gore, who praised the passage of the abortion law that protects "A women's right to choose."

Since 1973, abortion has been legal in the nation and more than 90% of abortions take place during the first months of pregnancy. The constitutional right to privacy gives women the right to choose to have an abortion.

The number of doctors, hospitals, and clinics in the United States providing abortion services has declined in the past 15 years. According to The Alan Guttmacher Institutes, the number of abortions has decreased among hospitals and doctors' offices: 2,908 in 1982, 2,582 in 1988, and 2,042 in 1996. But approximately 500,000 abortions were provided worldwide. It is surprising that almost 1,400 abortions are performed everyday yearly.

Although the constitution gives the right of abortion to women, it still poses many moral and religious questions. Before the discussion of the moral and religious views on abortion, let us review the scientific development of a baby in the womb. According to Dr. Stephen Schwartz of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology; "From conception the child is a complex, dynamic, and rapidly growing organism. About seven to nine days after conception, several hundred cells of the new individual have already formed, contact with the uterus is made, and implantation begins. Blood cells begin to develop at 17 days and a heart as early as 18 days."

The baby's eyes begin to form at 19 days. By the end of the 20th day the foundation of the child's brain, spinal cord, and entire nervous systems are developed. The embryonic heart, which begins as a simple tube, starts regular pulsation at 24 days, and in about one week there is a smooth rhythmic contraction and expansion.

By the 28th day the embryo has the building blocks for 40 pairs of muscles situated from the base of its skull to the lower end of its spinal column. By the end of the first month the child has completed the period of the greatest physical change in a lifetime.

At the end of the first month, the primary brain is present and the eyes, ears, and nasal organs have started to form. Although the heart is still incomplete, it is beating regularly and pumping blood cells through a closed vascular system.

By the beginning of the second month, the unborn child, small as it is, looks distinctly human. Yet, all this happens before the time a child's mother is even aware that she is pregnant.

By the end of the seventh week we see a well proportioned baby on a small scale. It bears the familiar external features and all the internal organs of adults, even though it is only less than an inch and weighs only 1/30th of an ounce.

In the third month, the child becomes very active. By the end of the month, he can kick his legs, turn his feet, curl and fan his toes, make a fist, move his thumb, bend his wrist, turn his head, squint, frown, open his mouth, and press his lips tightly together.

Is abortion murder? As long as the law gives a mother the right to choose to have an abortion, she will not be prosecuted. But we still wonder if abortion is murder morally and religiously.

Suppose someone intentionally kills an adult to get him out of the way (an innocent person, not an attacker). That surely would be murder. Suppose it was not an adult, but a child. Would that not be equally a case of murder? Sex, age and level of development are irrelevant here. Suppose it is a very small child, a baby just born. The child is not yet born, but about to be born. He still has months to go before birth. All of these refer to different points on the same human continuum. It is the same person throughout, only smaller, less developed, and sometimes out of sight. Merely being in another place (the womb) and smaller in size, one cannot take away the reality of murder.

Abortion is the killing of an innocent human being. The child is absolutely innocent. He is not an attacker, but a victim of circumstance. The unborn child is in his natural place of life. The child is only beginning his journey and the only thing to stop it is an untimely end.

We still remember the news about a college student who delivered her baby in a bathroom and dumped the baby into a garbage bin, or about a garbage bag found that contained a newly-born baby on the seaside in Long Beach. Or in another case a new born baby that was wrapped in a blanket was left in front of a church. When their mothers were identified, they were prosecuted and punished by law.

Some states now have laws to actually protect the mothers. According to the news on July 31, 2000, New York approved a new law that will not prosecute parents who leave

their new born babies at a safe place, such as a hospital; within five days after the delivery and that it is reported to police. Whether it is a safe place or not will be determined by the prosecutors. Other states have similar laws, but New York is probably the only one that accepts a “safe place” as an alternative to a hospital.

We must think of how we can avoid more killings. About two decades ago, ‘Free Sex’ was prevalent among young people. As a result STD’s, HIV, and many unwanted pregnancies happened all over the world. To help prevent the spread of the diseases, junior high and high schools implemented sex education classes as part of their curriculum. Also, there are many items and medicines on the market to help as well.

A Buddhist text teaches that one should avoid licentious sex. It is not necessary to look at scripture; it is immoral. Everyone knows that. But it is true that many people cannot control their sexual desires. Pregnancies among teenagers are decreasing because of sex-education in school, but teachers still have to teach their students not to have abortions and to refrain from illicit sex.

Although abortion is legal, it is not acceptable morally or religiously. Buddhism talks about life in three generations, the past, present, and future lives. A baby is not accidentally born. The baby has its own karmic relations or “*en*.” As a result of causes and conditions, the baby is born. *The Sutra of Deep Favor of Parent* says, “A person is born with his own fatal cause and with the fatal “*en*” of his parents. He receives a seed from his father, and features from his mother. With these relationships of cause and causality there is nothing to compare with a mother’s warm heart. We receive her deep favor before the baby’s figure is formed. The mother spreads her love toward her baby; however, she might have an abortion due to her own health, reputation, financial problems, convenience, deformity, or other miscellaneous reasons. Many of these reasons are unfounded. The Network Committee of Down Syndrome claims; “It is very natural to have some problems with a new born baby. Please do not draw a line between the perfect and the deformed. Please be prepared to accept your baby to be born, as it is.”

Abortion has many harmful influences. It is not always true, but it is said that a woman who has had an abortion tends to be more stressful and frigid. Her husband may cheat or become violent. Her children may misbehave or will become ill easily.

The embryo who was killed will never come back. Nevertheless, it is very important for parents to repent the wrong conduct and pray for the dead embryo. Whether the embryo was aborted, miscarried, or stillborn intentionally or non-intentionally, we must not forget that the baby had a strong wish to be born in this world.

It is very important for Buddhists and non-Buddhists to hold a memorial service for the unborn person for repentance, appreciation, and peace of mind. The dead embryo also needs to attain Buddhahood. You can hold the memorial service anytime. If you have your own situation with a dead unborn embryo or baby, please contact the minister of the Nichiren Shu temple or church to arrange for the service. I suggest that you bring some beautiful flowers, a cup of milk, candies, and toys for offerings. For some parents, the

unborn baby is a private matter and they do not want others to know. If that is the case, please let your minister know without hesitation. Your privacy will be assured. With this memorial service, let us pray for the dead embryo and baby. This will enable your family to be happier and the baby to be peaceful.

The future of abortion rights likely depends on who wins this fall's presidential election. Whoever wins, we must educate people not to have an abortion. For those who have had an abortion, stillbirth, or miscarriage, let us remember to hold the memorial service for them. It is one of the ways for the unborn child and us to have peace of a mind.



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