

Lecture in Praise of Nichiren Daishonin
April 2017, Oko Lecture

Upholding the Correct Attitude in Faith at One's Last Moment of Life (*Rinjū shōnen*)

Those who are bright, those who are foolish, those who are old, and those who are young—all are impermanent. (Gosho, p. 1482)

This is a passage from the Gosho, *Reply to Myōhō ama* (Myōhō ama gozen-gohenji), in which Nichiren Daishonin addresses the impermanence of human life. All living things eventually will meet their demise without fail. There are no exceptions. Although this is a solemn reality, there are not many people who give it deep thought.

In the *Letter from Sado* (Sado-gosho), Nichiren Daishonin states:

People in society fear being in the midst of a blazing flame, seeing the shadow of a sharp sword, and feeling their bodies succumbing to death. (Gosho, p. 578)

Since people have not experienced death, they are extremely fearful, and thinking about it may make them feel as though they are throwing themselves into a black hole. In general, this topic may be considered a taboo, and people may feel that they should avoid thinking about it if at all possible. There are even some individuals who turn away their thoughts from the fact that one day they will experience death. Instead, they focus on living life to their heart's content, since they believe that they only have one life to live. Such people totally ignore the strict law of cause and effect and live life, ruled by their earthly desires—the three poisons of greed, anger, and stupidity. Ultimately, they experience their last moment of life steeped in unhappiness and regret.

However, the doctrine of life and death spanning the three existences is expounded in the true Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, who states:

Life and death in the past; life and death in the present; and life and death in the future. (Gosho, p. 514)

Even when our physical body dies, the true entity of our life is forever immortal. Furthermore, the causes we made with our body, mouth, and mind while still alive also will remain as karma and will be carried on into our next life. This is true for both good and bad deeds. The effects that we experience now are from the causes that we made in the past, and the effects that we will face in the future are the consequences of the causes that we currently make. Even if our physical bodies are destroyed, our karma cannot be wiped out.

Thus, we must understand that death represents the end of this lifetime, while it is also the beginning of life in our next lifetime. When we gain this understanding, we will realize that our life should not be solely immersed in hedonistic pleasures to satisfy the five sense organs of

the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. We also should never be completely overtaken by desires for fame and fortune. Only when we embrace the mystic Law (*Myōhō*) and courageously and devotedly advance in our Buddhist practice, praying for the enlightenment of ourselves and others, can we achieve the great benefits of peace and security in this present life and good circumstances in future lifetimes and be able to lead a truly happy and fortunate life. Nichiren Daishonin teaches us that we must stand upon this conviction:

Thus, you must first learn about the final moment of life. Thereafter, you may learn about other matters. (*Gosho*, p. 1482)

The attitude that we uphold in our last moment of life greatly influences our life condition in our next life. Therefore, we must consider seriously what to do now, so that we do not experience karmic effects of suffering in our final moment. We should think now about experiencing the state of life which you really expect in our last moment of life. Then, we must consider the way of life that we should lead right now and put it into practice.

The Instant of One's Final Moment (*setsuna no rinjū*) and Extensive Preparation for One's Final Moment (*tanen no rinjū*)

One's final moment (*rinjū*) refers to the period between the time when death is imminent and the very instant before it occurs. Twenty-sixth High Priest Nichikan Shonin explains that there are two types of one's final moment. They are the very instant of one's final moment (*setsuna no rinjū*) and extensive preparation for one's final moment (*tanen no rinjū*). The instant of one's final moment is that extremely important minute when a person dies. Upholding the correct attitude in faith at one's last moment of life (*rinjū shōnen*) refers to being able to avoid the earthly desires of greed, anger, and stupidity until the moment of one's death and to complete the present life without ever failing to remember the Gohonzon and Daimoku in true spiritual peace.

Nichiren Daishonin teaches us:

Accordingly, since the great man who is now deceased chanted Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyo in his final moment, the entirety of his evil karma from this lifetime and from time without beginning will be transformed into the seed of Buddhahood. His life is characterized by the principles of earthly desires are enlightenment, the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana, and attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. (*Gosho*, p. 1483)

These are the Daishonin's golden words. When we come upon our final moment of life, if we are able to uphold the correct attitude in faith, visualize the Gohonzon in our hearts, and chant Daimoku, there is absolutely no doubt that we will be able to expiate our negative karma from time without beginning and attain Buddhahood in our present form (*sokushin jōbutsu*).

However, this is easier said than done. It is not an easy task to chant sincere Daimoku when we come upon our final moment. We cannot possibly accomplish this without carrying out our faith and practice every day without ever slackening. Nichikan Shonin stated:

The determination of spirit that one has at the last moment of life depends on the

benefits gained from extended years of practice. It also depends on being continuously mindful of never forsaking [one's practice].

(Essentials of the Fuji School [Fuji shugaku yōshu], vol. 3, p. 259)

Life may seem long, but it is actually short. Each moment and each day represent precious time in our lives for our Buddhist faith and practice. We must be prepared as though now is the last moment of our lives and perform Gongyo, chant Daimoku, and do shakubuku, so that we will have no regrets. This is what is meant by extensive preparation for one's final moment.

Three Factors That Prevent Us From Upholding the Correct Attitude in Faith at Our Last Moment of Life

Our last moment of life is an important and solemn time to achieve enlightenment. However, it is also a time when various factors compete with one another to try to upset our minds and prevent us from attaining a peaceful and tranquil life condition. Nichikan Shonin presents the following three factors that function to obstruct us:

1. Agony of Death
2. Workings of the devil
3. Grief-stricken wails of the spouse, children and others; attachments to material treasures.

First, the agony of death is severe pain, as though the flesh is being torn apart from the bone. This is often compared to the pain of 1,000 sharp blades stabbing one's body. To prevent this, a person must be mindful of amassing good karma on a daily basis. It is also important to always refrain from ridiculing and hurting others, whether or not the issue is true. Nichikan Shonin explains that, if a person on the deathbed is writhing in pain, we must not carelessly touch him or her. Even being lightly touched with gentle fingers may feel as painful as being stoned with jagged rocks.

The workings of the devil refer to the functions of the three obstacles and four devils that confront the practitioners of true Buddhism to prevent them from upholding the correct attitude in faith at their last moment. Manifestations of earthly desires, such as greed and anger may appear at one's final moment. Moreover, devilish functions may enter the entities of family members or relatives and cause them to become emotional, which in turn causes the person on his or her deathbed to become stressed and upset. Thus, devilish functions take various forms to try to lure them into the evil paths.

Those who practice according to the Buddha's teachings will attain enlightenment without fail. Therefore, the workings of the three obstacles and four devils become all the more intense to try to obstruct such achievement. In *Curing Illness through Different Teachings, such as Hinayana, Mahayana, the Pre-Lotus Sutra, and the Lotus Sutra* (Jibyō daishō gonjitsu imoku), the Daishonin states:

At the final moment of your life, you must be mindful of this. (*Gosho*, p. 1239)

Thus, we must be duly prepared during normal times, far ahead of our last moment, for the devils to compete with one another to obstruct our way when the time comes. In our final

moment, we should completely entrust ourselves to the Gohonzon. We should not be upset or shaken, no matter what may occur. We must single-mindedly muster our most sincere and greatest power of faith and chant Daimoku in our hearts, praying that we can uphold the correct attitude in faith at our last moment of life.

Finally, the Daishonin explains that the grief-stricken wailing of our spouse, children, and others and our attachments to material treasures will be obstacles that will prevent us from upholding the correct attitude in faith at our last moment of life. Without a doubt, there is nothing more heart-wrenching than being preceded in death by our wife or husband with whom we have shared happy times and sad occasions over many years. However, this is the most important moment in life that will determine whether or not our loved one will attain enlightenment. When we are in the presence of someone who is approaching the final moment, we must cultivate a strong spirit to overcome our sadness and tell our loved one, “Do not worry about anything. Nichiren Daishonin will lead you to enlightenment. Let us steadfastly chant Daimoku.” At that moment, it is essential to chant Daimoku at a steady pace, not too fast and not too slow.

Furthermore, those who are about to die may not be able to open their eyes or talk, but their capacity to hear is known to remain keen until the very end. Therefore, it is important never to talk about things that our loved ones enjoyed or disliked or other matters that would cause them to cling to their attachments. Most significantly, we must simply chant and let them hear Daimoku. Nichikan Shonin states:

Those who encourage a person in one’s final moment are essential.

(Essentials of the Fuji School (Fuji shugaku yōshu), vol. 3, p. 264)

When a family member is about to die, it is important for us to try as much as possible to function as good influences that are there to help.

Chanting Daimoku at the Last Moment of Life

Nichikan Shonin wrote:

One’s single-minded, spiritual determination at one’s last moment is more powerful than 100 years of the power of practice....Even a minimal amount will bring forth tremendous consequences....At the moment of death, since the power of faith is extremely intense, the powers of the Buddha and of the Law also will be strongly manifested, to enable the departing individual to attain enlightenment in one’s present form. (ibid., p. 268)

Thus, he taught that chanting even a single Daimoku by mustering forth the great power of faith from one’s entire body and spirit at the final moment of life can be superior to performing the Buddhist practice for 100 years. He further instructs that, as a consequence, the departing individual will receive immeasurable amounts of the powers of the Buddha and the Law and will attain enlightenment in his or her present form without fail.

However, if, during one’s life, one ordinarily neglected to do Gongyō and chant Daimoku, and was lazy and committed other slanders, this person may suffer from the agonies of death and from other workings of devilish functions. Let us bear in mind that such an

individual would be unable to distinguish right from wrong, would lose the ability to uphold the correct attitude in faith, and would not be able to chant Daimoku with a strong determination in faith.

High Priest Nichinyo Shonin stated:

Indeed, chanting Daimoku is the direct path to achieving enlightenment in this lifetime. Therefore, by all means, we must unite our hearts as one, chant Daimoku, and urge others to do the same. In other words, exerting our efforts in our practice for ourselves and for others (*jigyō keta*) will become the greatest good memory of having been born human in this lifetime.

(*Dainichiren*, No. 841, pp. 28-29)

The Daishonin writes:

When you reach the crossroads of life and death, I will surely come to guide you.
(*Gosho*, p. 1361; *The Gosho of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 51)

Thus, those who continue to repeatedly and consistently uphold faith and practice for themselves and for others, without ever slackening, will, in their last moment of life, be enveloped in the great compassion of Nichiren Daishonin, the True Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law. They will be able to conquer the fear of death and achieve a life condition of peace and tranquility.

Let us increasingly strive to exert our efforts into improving our faith and practice so that we will be able to chant pure Daimoku at the end of this lifetime and so that we can face our final moment with great appreciation for our families and all other individuals and feel tremendous satisfaction for the life that we have led.