

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SUICIDE, CARING FOR ASHES, and THE AFTER-LIFE OF NON-BELIEVERS

With Reverend Raido Hirota

THE SUICIDE OF A BELIEVER

Question: If a person who has practiced true Buddhism all their life commits suicide, what happens to all their accumulated good fortune? What happens to that individual?

Rev. Hirota (RH): For someone to practice this Buddhism since birth is of inestimable value. I don't know why this person committed suicide, but our life itself is not ours. One may think so, but it is not our own. We did not create our life, and we did not buy it; we were granted it as a loan.

To destroy yourself is an awful thing to do, especially since your life is borrowed and does not belong to you - it is not yours to do with as you please. But for a person who has practiced all their life, their life was not in vain. If that person truly practiced the Daishonin's Buddhism, then her sincerity is not wasted or lost.

Within each of us are the Ten Worlds, from Hell to Buddhahood. In the past we did a lot of bad things as well as a lot of good things. The future of that is right now. Right now we experience the effects of both good deeds and bad deeds. Even if we practice true Buddhism, if we commit bad deeds we will have a negative effect; and if we do good deeds we will have a positive effect.

There are some people who say that if there is no one to follow you in your practice, such as children, then you have wasted a whole lifetime of chanting. That is just not so, it is never a waste of time. The benefits accumulated from practice do not disappear.

CARING FOR THE ASHES OF A LOVED ONE

Question: What is the traditional way of keeping one's parents', one's loved one's ashes? Can they be kept on or near the altar? Or is there a special place they should be kept?

RH: In Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism we place only the Gohonzon of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo at the center of our attention, that is how we attain enlightenment. The ashes, the stupa (small tope with a person's Buddhist name written on it), pictures and other relics of the deceased are never placed on or near the altar. If you place these things on the altar you are displacing Gohonzon, which is the center of this practice. Your mind will be focused on the objects rather than on the Gohonzon.

For 49 days the spirit of the deceased is at your home. That is why the ashes are kept at your home for 49 days. After that you pray to Gohonzon for the enlightenment of the deceased. This is the correct way to treat the dead. If you keep ashes on the altar it is wrong. The ashes are not the object of our practice. In placing the ashes on the altar you are not following the teachings stated in the fifth prayer of Gongyo: "I sincerely pray for the earliest realization of world peace and happiness, through the Gohonzon's bestowal of equal benefits upon the entire universe and the whole world." By keeping the ashes on your altar your practice is self-serving and not magnanimous and for the greater good of the whole world.

In Japan some people cannot afford to buy a burial plot so they ask the temple they belong to keep the remains of their loved ones.

THE AFTER-LIFE OF NON-BELIEVERS

Question: There are people who spend their entire lives practicing other religions with such deep belief. Do they gain benefit for having had such deep faith, or is it wiped out at the end of one's life?

RH: Christians would be one example of this. Christians care about others, are charitable, and helpful. A practitioner of Christianity believes he will go to heaven after death because by helping

others he is in service to god. Even after death he is still a servant of god. Christianity teaches that mankind is god's creation, and man belongs to him. If the teaching you believe in is wrong, you become complacent or self-satisfied, and in complacency or self-satisfaction there is no benefit or enlightenment. A wrong teaching can never lead to a correct answer.

Nichiren Daishonin writes in "Rissho Ankoku Ron," "With the power of faith that is in their hearts, why must they vainly give credence to heretical doctrines?" What he means is, if you care anything about others, if you feel the pain of others, don't believe in heretical teachings. Ponder for a moment about which religion is the true teaching. Seek out the true religion, and eventually you will come to understand what is wrong in heretical thought, and from this wrong thought will emerge a true mind in the true religion. Those with a kind (faithful) heart cannot be influenced by heretical doctrine.

If one has faith in heretical religions, one's belief does not disappear in death. It remains with them. One will remain sinful and culpable. Life itself is a continuum.