

## September Discussion Topic – Respect for the dignity of life

The starting point for Buddhism is the value and sanctity of life. For example, in one letter to a follower, Nichiren states that the value of a single day of life exceeds all other treasures. Buddhism further views each individual life as a manifestation of a universal life force.

From the Buddhist perspective, given the mind-boggling number of life-forms that fill the universe, human life is a rare privilege with special responsibilities. As Nichiren, referring to a passage from the Nirvana Sutra, states: “It is rare to be born a human being. The number of those endowed with human life is as small as the amount of earth one can place on a fingernail.” What makes human life unique is the scale of our choice, the degree to which we are free to choose to act for good or evil, to help or to harm.

A book on the challenges of aging introduces the story of a young woman, married and with young children, who found herself suddenly in the position of having to care for her mother-in-law, bedridden following a stroke. At first the young woman could not understand why this had happened to her, why her already demanding life should be further burdened in this way. Through her Buddhist practice she was able to realize that she could, depending on how she chose to approach this situation, make of it an opportunity to create value. She was able to transform her initial feelings of resentment toward the older woman into a sense of appreciation.

Ultimately, the Buddhist understanding of human dignity is rooted in the idea that we are able to choose the path of self-perfection. We can, in other words, consistently make those difficult choices for creativity, growth and development. This state of self-perfection—a condition of fully developed courage, wisdom and compassion—is described as Buddhahood or enlightenment. The idea that all people—all life, in fact—have this potential is expressed by the concept, stressed particularly in the Mahayana tradition, that all living beings possess Buddha nature.

In concrete, practical terms, this comes down to the idea that everyone has a mission—a unique role that only she or he can play, a unique perspective to offer, a unique contribution to make. As SGI President Daisaku Ikeda wrote: “Everyone has a mission. The universe does nothing without purpose. The fact that we exist means that we have purpose.”

The older woman in the story likewise sought to find a way to use her severely limited capacities to contribute to the well-being of the household. Since she still had use of her hands, she took up knitting—partly as a form of therapy, partly to make useful things for the family. She also enjoyed keeping watch over the home when the others were away.

From the Buddhist perspective, we always have the option of choosing to create value from even the most difficult situation. Through such choices we can fulfill our unique purpose and mission in life, and in this way give fullest expression to the inherent treasure of our human dignity. There is perhaps no more solid foundation for human rights than a widespread awakening to the human dignity that resides in every one of us.

1. Do you believe in the dignity of life and that everyone has an unique mission?
2. Have you been able to change something in your life by respecting the dignity of life?