

Article

The Dialectical of Life and Death in Contemporary Sōka Gakkai

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Abstract: Doctrinal reasoning, the practice of chanting *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* and its vision for *kōsen-rufu* has been how Sōka Gakkai (SG) promulgated Nichiren Buddhism. This paper explores, in an in-depth anthropological manner, how doctrinal issues matter significantly in the meaning of funeral practices in contemporary SG. So-called Friend Funerals have become widely common and demonstrate how SG members' understanding of death and mortuary rites differ in some significant ways from common practices in Japan. To understand why specific funeral rituals are not in and of themselves considered of primary importance when a person dies in SG, this paper discusses its reading of key tenants of Nichiren Buddhism. What hotoke or buddha means is commonly seen in Japan as something achieved upon death facilitated by specific funeral rites. How such views fundamentally differ in SG is explored here based on long-term fieldwork and participant observation, as well as interviews and review of its doctrine. The research suggests that SG members engage in a cross-generational endeavour for *kōsen-rufu* where personal actions—what could be described as the 'political' existence of this life—matters but in a non-dualistic way as this simultaneously becomes the sphere that 'transcends' that contemporary existence. How one views death is not only seen as something relevant at the end of life, nor only to those remaining, but is taken as a reality that becomes the impetus for giving deeper meaning to how one acts in daily life as part of a cross-generational movement.

Keywords: Sōka Gakkai; Nichiren Buddhism; friends funerals; the mystic law of life and death; *kōsen-rufu*; buddhahood; life and death as dialectical

1. Sōka Gakkai as a Collective Movement for *Kōsen-rufu*

Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai 創価教育学会 (SKG; Value Creation Education Society), the forerunner to Sōka Gakkai (SG) was established on 18 November 1930, which was when its first general meeting was held in conjunction with the publication of the first volume of *Sōka kyōikugaku taiei* 創価教育学体系 (System of Value-creation Educational Study) by Makiguchi Tsunesaburō 牧口常三郎 (1873–1944). Headed by Makiguchi, SKG became a lay-affiliate of the Nichiren sect commonly referred to as the Fuji School that had taken the name Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗 in 1912.

Unlike groups that became constituted as superstitious cults and 'pseudo-religions' which made them fair game for state persecution (see [Josephson 2012](#); [Thomas 2019](#)), SKG was constituted in a somewhat different light. For example, groups such as Omotokyō 大本教, that were later labelled under the same category of 'new religion' in the postwar period attracted in the late 1920s possibly up to a million newly independent peasants, labourers, and most alarming for the state, urbanised women ([Garon 1997](#)). Those who joined SKG in the 1930s, on the other hand, were primarily school teachers mostly from the Tokyo area and amounted only to around five thousand members including their extended family and acquaintances. So although it became common to constitute disparate groups under the same category 'new religions' in the postwar period (see [Thomas 2019](#); see [Horii 2018](#)),

SG was not labelled as such until it grew rapidly in the 1960s.¹ Furthermore, while Makiguchi converted to the Shōshū school in 1928, his view of both the teachings of this school and the general category of ‘religion’ was complex and marked by a number of tensions. On the one hand, he accepted the modern religious-secular division of labour that saw religion as something pertaining to the inner life; simultaneously he regarded any engagement with social realities as a subsequent outcome of the workings of conscience. As a result, he also regarded popular and officially sanctioned beliefs as fully intercepting with the social order, which was why he contested the normative ‘Shinto secular’ consensus as that which upheld the legitimacy of the military polity.² He placed emperor-related shrine Shinto on the same plane as other belief systems, and judged this to be incompatible with social flourishing. This view was enacted in the burning of amulets issued by Ise Jingu, which led to his arrest for lèse-majesté in 1943, where he died in 1944.³

Makiguchi, like the postwar SG, found the specific attraction to the *Lotus Sūtra* (abbreviated *Hok(k)ekyō* 法華經) and Nichiren Buddhism in its emphasis on a strict law of causality. This law, or Dharma, defined here as *Myōhō-rengē-kyō* 妙法蓮華經, is seen to underlie all phenomena as a unified substance and the chanting of which Nichiren proclaimed a person can reveal their buddha state. This approach posed a challenge to the cultural mores of Japanese society in its focus on individual practice to ‘reveal buddhahood’ as a way to transform inner conscience, and subsequent social action that often contested the Japanese social normative order as one often intricately rooted in Shinto beliefs. Buddhist theory instead was to be promoted as meaningful in daily life in the way that Makiguchi had emphasised the Buddhist law (仏法 *buppō*) as a law of cause and effect operating in each person’s thoughts and actions rather than the reliance on something external as determining the workings of the social world. *Kōsen-rufu* was seen as a movement of propagation to spread consciousness and practice of this law seen as operating in life phenomena.

This emphasis on the individual locus of power and the emphasis on chanting and Buddhist study saw the organisation develop into a significant presence in Japanese society in the postwar period with as many as ten million members in Japan, usually counted in households as around 8.27 million.⁴ These numbers from 2016 here need to be treated with some caution and for instance do not reflect the noticeable decline of children and young people over the past decade. The dwindling numbers in the first instance relate to the general demographic changes that have taken place in Japan. Simultaneously, accurate membership numbers have always been difficult to assess. From my own observations roughly a quarter of registered members are seldom active in the organisation and are members in name only (Fisker-Nielsen 2012). At the same time, the number of overseas members is growing with some two million from Asia, Europe, America as well as Africa and India today. The size of SG in Japan, and its community reach across the country has sustained support for the political party Kōmeitō, which was established in 1964, and which today has come to play a central role in Japanese politics (see Fisker-Nielsen 2012, 2016; Ehrhardt et al. 2014; Liff and Maeda 2019).

As a Buddhist grassroots network, millions of local members meet regularly face-to-face to discuss Nichiren Buddhist philosophy, to study and chant together and to share experiences of the practice. Organised by members in specific neighbourhoods and communities, SG meetings are distinctively different from typical sermons lead by Buddhist priests that can be found across Japan. The practice and experience of chanting became the centrifugal dynamism by which SG developed into an organisation where millions of people told of the benefits of their Buddhist practice that was seen to change their life for the better. Through a strong focus on doctrinal study they began to reconstitute their identity as

¹ See Hardacre (2005) on the intertwinement of media representations with public opinion of religious organizations.

² The arbitrariness of secular-religious normative order that underpinned the modern Japanese nation-state has become a contested topic often referred to as Critical Religion (see for example, Josephson 2012; Isomae 2012; Horii 2016) which argues for its ideological function. Makiguchi saw the arbitrariness of these categories.

³ Andrew Gebert, *Makiguchi Tsunesaburō: Chi no kanōsei e no shin* 牧口恒三郎: 知の可能性への信 [Tsunesaburo Makiguchi: Faith in the Possibilities of Knowledge], Submitted to Waseda University, Tokyo as M.A. Thesis in 2005. See also, Thomas (2019).

⁴ <https://www.sgi.org/snapshot/sgi-membership.html>.

practitioners whose objective was, like Nichiren, the bigger goal of *kōsen-rufu* ('to declare and spread widely' (the teachings)) as stated in the *Lotus Sūtra*. We shall see how individual practice and the idea of *kōsen-rufu* become central to specific ideas about death and funerals.

2. The Mystic Law of Life and Death

Most radical about Nichiren (1222–82) was his objective to actualise the 'Buddha' land in society rather than confining the practice of the *Lotus Sūtra* to meditative spaces and professional monks (Habito 1999, p. 299; Fisker-Nielsen 2012, pp. 38–39). This drive to actualise doctrine in behaviour came to characterise the rapid growth of the SG movement in the postwar period.

SG, like Nichiren Shōshū, follows Nichiren's disciple-priest Nikkō 日興 (1246–1333) who prioritised Nichiren's chanting of *daimoku* 題目, the repetition of *nam[u]-myōho-renge-kyō* to Nichiren's *honzon* 本尊 (object of worship (for observing the mind)). Central is the idea that individual salvation lies in revealing Buddhahood is the theory of *ichinen sanzen* 一念三千, or the 'three thousand possible realms' (*sanzen*) in 'one thought-moment' (*ichinen*). As discussed later this article this intertwined with the objective of *kōsen rufu* 広宣流布, which literally means 'to declare and spread widely', that is, proselytising.

In a letter written in 1255, which is much quoted and read in SG, Nichiren writes to one of his followers:

'If you wish to free yourself from the sufferings of birth and death you have endured since time without beginning and to attain without fail unsurpassed enlightenment in this lifetime, you must perceive the mystic truth that is originally inherent in all living beings. This truth is *myōho-renge-kyō*. Chanting *myōho-renge-kyō* will therefore enable you to grasp the mystic truth innate in all life. . . . if you think the law is outside yourself, you are embracing not the Mystic Law but an inferior teaching. . . . you must summon up deep faith that *myōho-renge-kyō* is your life itself'. (WND 1999, p. 3)⁵

This writing is often used by SG to theologically justify that no intermediary is required to attain enlightenment, priest or otherwise. This by extension as we shall see applies to Friend Funerals that are seen as equally valid with or without priests. This is because Nichiren is regarded as breaking down common conceptions that 'buddha' or *hotoke* is someone unique, or someone separate from ordinary people, or as something one is bestowed or become upon death. This is in line with how the principle of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds and the theory of *ichinen sanzen* are interpreted as discussed in the next sections.

Nichiren in SG is also consistently represented as an ordinary person who is seen to have been enlightened to the Buddhist law and like anyone subject to the law of cause and effect and to the mutual possessions of the Ten Worlds, while he is simultaneously represented as driven by a vow, or desire for all living beings to be able to 'display the dignified attributes that they inherently possess' (WND 2006, p. 832).⁶ This is what is regarded as the objective of *kōsen-rufu*, which is seen as a movement to promote all living beings as possessing the buddha state. It is this seeking to see the buddha state in oneself and maintaining a belief that it exists in others that is the ethos characterising the *kōsen-rufu* movement in SG in a phenomenological way.

Perceiving this 'truth' (seen as the buddha state) to exist within one's own life is pursued through the daily chanting *nam[u]-myōho-renge-kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經. This phrase literally means 'devotion to the mystic law of cause and effect through sound/voice/teaching'. As discussed below, this practice gives people a sense of 'energy' (*genki ni narimasu*), and they say they come to feel a deeper connection with themselves and the people around them. SG members chant to feel and believe in their own and

⁵ Writings of Nichiren Daishonin (WND). Volume 1.

⁶ Writings of Nichiren Daishonin (WND). Volume 2.

others' capacity for 'buddhahood' seeing this as the key tenet of Nichiren Buddhism as explained by Daisaku Ikeda (1928–), the third president and now 60 year-long leader:

'In Nichiren Buddhism, attaining enlightenment is not about embarking on some inconceivably long journey to become a resplendent, godlike Buddha; it is about accomplishing a transformation in the depths of one's being. In other words, it is not a matter of practicing in order to scale the highest summit of enlightenment at some point in the distant future. Rather it is a constant, moment-to-moment, inner struggle between revealing or innate Dharma nature or allowing ourselves to be ruled by our fundamental darkness and delusion'. (Ikeda 2006, p. 14)

SG members experience this 'greater self' (*daiga* 大我) of *bukkai* (仏界 realm of the buddha) through chanting. Accessing a different consciousness happens through personal devotion—as expressed by *namu* 南無 and inner transformation. SG repeatedly emphasises that chanting to Nichiren's *honzon* is an active process to connect with a consciousness of 'buddha' or *hotoke* rather than praying to an object for help. This undermines the idea that the *honzon* contains power as an object in and of itself. Indeed, the idea that its power can only be activated when sanctified by a high priest became the primary point of dispute between the priesthood and the laity that ended with SG being excommunicated by the Nichiren Shōshū in 1991 (see Bocking 1994 for a detailed account).

SG emphasised *ichinen sanzen* 一念三千 or the 'three thousand possible realms' (*sanzen*) in 'one thought-moment' (*ichinen*) pointing to people's inner state as crucial to all aspects of life. They emphasised Nichiren's point that one enters the buddha consciousness only through faith (*shinkō* 信仰), or that buddhahood will depend on the strength of one's faith (WND 1999, p. 832). The priesthood emphasised the successive high priests as essentially one and inseparable from the object of worship and the necessity of priestly sanctification to bestow power upon Nichiren's *honzon* or it would be considered a counterfeit.⁷ SG stressed that it is only through individual effort to chant to Nichiren's *honzon* that buddha consciousness can emerge (see footnote 7). This approach emphasised 'life-state' as central to everything, and as we shall see, is what underpins SG funerals and the organisation of cemeteries.

Through around three hundred semi-structured and open-ended interviews with the author and still more casual conversations during fieldwork periods over close to two decades, active members tell of the experience of 'merging' with the law through chanting, reaching a state of non-dual consciousness. This is described as 'we have the same power as the universe—so when we describe Buddhahood, it is in a sense that we embody the power of the universe', one woman in her forties summed up in a group interview (Tokyo, November 2019).

Nichiren refers to the state of 'enlightenment' as *kyōchi-myōgō* 境智冥合, the fusion of the objective reality or truth with the subjective wisdom of the person. This embodied sense of themselves and the 'universal' is described by the same woman as: 'Generally, there is a perception (or awareness *ishiki*) amongst Japanese members that all lives are part of the universe as one (entity). There is no border between our lives and the universe.'⁸ Another man in his thirties from the same group interview explained, '*Nam-myōhō-rengē kyō* is the fundamental law that permeate the universe and life.'⁹ Some people also described feeling their life and the universe as non-dual when they chant

⁷ The perspective in the Nichiren Shōshū magazine *Dai-Nichiren* 大日蓮 (Sept. 1991) states: 'The true Buddha, the Daishonin, the Dai-Gohonzon of the high sanctuary, and the successive high priests are all essentially one and inseparable object of worship' (Nōke Literature 06/09/1991). The priesthood remain critical of SG's supposedly counterfeit *honzon*. The split between Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shōshū priesthood was inevitable (see also Bocking 1994; see also Issues between the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and the Soka Gakkai Vol. 1 and Vol. 2 1991. Soka Gakkai; see also Metraux 1992).

⁸ Japanese: 「普通、日本のメンバーの意識の中には、生命は、宇宙に存在する一部であり、一体としてみます。宇宙と生命に境界線はないと考えます。」.

⁹ Japanese: 「南無妙法蓮華経は、宇宙と生命を貫く根源の法です。」.

nam-myōho-renge-kyō in a concentrated manner, which are typically also found as basic points of official explanation,¹⁰ and seen in SG study materials as someone drew my attention to in a follow up email.¹¹

SG members report this sense of *kyōchi-myōgō*, as ‘oneness of the person and the law’ as Nichiren depicted on his *honzon* (discussed below). ‘Buddha’ is thus not seen as an end-product but as a ‘deepened’ or ‘raised life-state’, a feeling of strengthened life-force or life energy (*seimei ryoku* 生命力). As other forms of meditative practices, this is characterised by an increased level of positive energy, a sense of feeling ‘refreshed’ and having a ‘broadened perspective’. They report also that chanting results in feelings of greater compassion towards others, and the ability to apply greater wisdom in their daily interactions with others that is seen to enhance human relations in a mutually positive way. This may of course not always be experienced or perceived as such (see McLaughlin 2019).

Yet, there is a general consciousness of ‘non-duality’ that intricately relates to ideas about life and death. ‘When my life-state is low, I feel a sense of disconnect with others, with little energy to do things, whereas if my life-state is high I feel a deep sense of connection with myself and with others, I think more positively and creatively, and I feel more compassionate towards others’, a young Japanese woman in her twenties explains as to why she makes the effort to chant every day for about an hour.

The idea that inner transformation, referred to as ‘human revolution’ (*ningen kakumei* 人間革命), is not only possible but also holds the key to the nature of social action, intricately relates to the representation and perception of Nichiren as a social reformer who advocated internal awareness of one’s own buddha state, a kind of cosmic plenitude by which Nichiren saw his own significance in the world (see Habito 1999) as key to realise the buddha land. The practice of the Buddhist law, or mystic law (*myōho*) is perceived as an experience of raised awareness as the embodied locus through which one connects and interrelates with the wider social world. This experience and worldview matter to people as seen during SG funerals in the next section.

Nichiren’s *honzon* is the object to which members in SG chant to reveal their ‘buddha’ state, an ‘object for observing the mind’ that is regarded to be Nichiren’s expression of enlightenment of the person to the law. SG members often use the term ‘mirror’ to describe the *honzon* as a tool by which they come to experience a higher life-state through the process of *kyōchi-myōgō*. Dolce (1999) argues that Nichiren did not invent a new concept, but rather followed esoteric Buddhism in visualising the ‘absolute’. Nichiren’s *honzon*, referred to usually as *gohonzon* as a sign of respect (*go* 御) depicts in a diagrammatic form in Chinese characters the enlightenment of the person (Nichiren) to the mystic law (*namu-myōho-renge-kyō*).

If chanting is the way to reveal the life-state of buddha or *hotoke* this is also seen to be something to be revealed in each moment and never a constant state. This differs significantly from common perceptions in Japan. The typical Japanese image of *hotoke* is that it is ‘something’ one becomes upon death, usually facilitated by mortuary rites conducted by priests. (Suzuki 2013, p. 15) argues that ‘the construction of immortality and extending an individual’s biological finality into eternity is the core significance of mortuary rites’ in Japan. In SG however, actual moments of action become the place of transcendence of finitude, and, as we shall see, what bestows people’s lives with meaning. As seen in the next section this is intricately related to the meaning and motivation attached to one’s actions, the ultimate motivation being that of working for *kōsen-rufu*.

3. Death, Friends Funerals, and Memorial Cemetery Parks in Sōka Gakkai

Japanese mortuary rites commonly serve to extend a cyclical sense of renewal in the face of filling the need to assert death and ultimate life meaning (Suzuki 2013). Below we shall see that in the case

¹⁰ <https://www.sokanet.jp/kyougakunyuumon/nichirendaishouninnobuppou/nammyouhourenngekyou/01-2/>.

¹¹ 池田先生は、「すべての人間は全宇宙と一体です。全宇宙のあらゆる営みが、一人の人間の独自性を成り立たせている。言い換えれば、一人一人の人間は「大宇宙を」独自の仕方映し出す。小宇宙です。個人は本来全人なのです。」 (Ikeda et al. 2000) (法華經の知恵2巻 p. 103 (The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra Vol 2).

of SG, mortuary rites themselves take on less significance than the kind of life a person led. Since ‘buddha’ is not seen to be something delivered upon death facilitated by particular rituals, but as a something found in attention being paid to one’s inner state in the process of living, unlike many funeral practices in Japan rites are not considered to have special efficacy.

In essence the funeral ceremony is not different from SG’s members daily Buddhist practice of chanting the *daimoku* and reciting parts of the *Lotus Sūtra*. No esoteric ritual is regarded as a plausible way to alleviate the dead,¹² nor can we find the use of memorial tablets decorated with posthumous Buddhist names to symbolically indicate one has joined the Sangha so otherwise typical in Japan such as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Japanese graveyard with Toba (Memorial Tablets) typical in Japan (picture by author).

SG poses in this way a challenge to the widely authoritative idea in Japan that effective power is contained in rituals conducted by ordained priests, although the typical high cost of Buddhist funerals also undermined this perception when it was felt to resemble more of a money-making enterprise. The priestly role of Nichiren Shōshū was fundamentally challenged in this regard as well. The promulgation of a ‘buddha’, including Nichiren himself, as an individual enlightened to the law of cause and effect is seen to challenge the need for specially ordained priests as intermediaries to personal salvation. This is particularly conspicuous when it comes to mortuary rites as they are commonly believed to be necessary and appropriately conducted by priests whose effective power ‘transform’ a person, or their soul into *hotoke*, or facilitate their entry into the spirit world of the dead. With the excommunicated by Nichiren Shōshū priesthood of SG, the significance of specific

¹² As this would contradict the theory of *ichinen sanzen*.

rituals further decreased, including funeral rites, and instead the significance of Friends Funerals, 友人葬 (*yūjinsō*) increased.

When SG was excommunicated by the priesthood in 1991 around fifty priests left Nichiren Shoshū with SG, taking on the group name 'Reformist Priests'. During these early years of transforming functions previously occupied mostly by the priesthood, some relatives of deceased SG members found it unacceptable to hold funerals without a priest presiding. As a result, an arrangement with the Reformist Priests came into being where upon request they would step in when practically possible. These were rare cases (perhaps one in every two hundred funerals)¹³ and came primarily from non-SG relatives; the majority of SG members themselves did not see priests as conducting special rituals that they could not be undertaken by members themselves. As the organisation transitioned to a full lay organisation and further shifted the mindset away from ordained priests presiding over special events such as funeral ceremonies, these requests mostly subsided. They occasionally still occur when specific personal ties to a particular 'reformist' priest exist.

As shown below, other entrenched patriarchal structures have been challenged as a Buddhist funeral can comfortably be led by either a man or a woman in line with the wishes of the deceased's family. What is of more significance than the ceremony itself, however, is the deceased person's own individual 'life-state' and how they lived their life. This is a dismissal of authority as residing in the ceremony itself as a means to deliver a person to the 'hereafter', although this does not mean the funeral ceremony is unimportant as a commemoration of the life of the deceased.

However, the idea of a 'correct' understanding of death as part of a cycle of life is read as crucial to Nichiren Buddhism in SG because this intricately is seen to relate to how a person live their life regarded as most significant. This is seen as expressed in Nichiren's interpretation of the theory of *ichinen sanzen* that elucidates the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, a theory that describes reality as a constantly changing inner-outer process in relation to a person's life-state. The Ten Worlds are different life-states that Nichiren described in for example his 1273 treatise *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind* (WND 1999, p. 358). These range from 'Hell' as a state of rage to higher life-states such as voice-hearers or cause-awakened ones (the two vehicles) where people are for example willing to look at the reality of death and seek the eternal above being distracted by what may appear otherwise harsh realities of life from a lower life-state. The state of Bodhisattva, which is described as consisting of bodhi (enlightenment) and sattva (beings) is seen to indicate a person who seeks enlightenment while leading others to enlightenment. Buddhahood is regarded as a condition accessible, and revealed in such bodhisattva actions, and is not seen as a condition by which one becomes a special being who is removed from sufferings. Such explanations of the Ten Worlds and their mutual possession promote the idea that a person can change their life-state at any moment, even find the state of 'Buddhahood' in the state of 'Hell'. This concept of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds are typical basic study points discussed at meetings and are some of the first concepts new members learn.

This theory of 'life-state', the possibility of change at any moment, and view of death as non-dualistic is what the second president of SG Toda Jōsei (1900–1958) meant when he apparently would often say, the final problem that Buddhism as a doctrine and practice must provide is an answer to death. Toda used this way of talking to make SG members evaluate different kinds of human practices and to show that Nichiren provided, in his eyes, the most comprehensive view of this existential question, a perspective that sustained his Buddhist practice and assessment of his own imprisonment which he regarded as standing up for the 'correct' law or principles of humanity.¹⁴

¹³ Personal communication with a vice-president of SG 6 May 2020 who estimated the numbers based on observations in his own region in Saitama. The SG does not keep any record of such funerals as they occur primarily based on personal relations to a particular priest. However, those priests (if still alive) are active members of SG today while some became Nichiren scholars.

¹⁴ The History and Conviction of the Soka Gakkai 1951 (republished by SGI-UK in 1995).

Theoretically, the views of death are based on the concept of the Three Truths (三諦 *san-tai*), the truth of non-substantiality (*kūtai* 空諦), the truth of temporary existence (*ketai* 假諦), and the truth of the Middle Way (*chūtai* 中諦), which correspond to the first three factors in the theory of *ichinen sanzan*. These three aspects of the ‘unseen’ (*me ni mienai* 目に見えない), the ‘material’ (*katachi no aru* 形のあ
る), and the process itself that goes beyond and contains the two, the Middle Way, are explained as the three integral parts that make up the ultimate reality.¹⁵ This contains the idea of ‘life-death’ as inseparable, or non-dual, as both aspects are simultaneously substance and non-substance and subject to the process of constant change, including alternating between phases of life and death, which is expressed as the Middle Way. SG members study these abstract theories about death. The following three ethnographic examples are from people I have met during various fieldwork periods in Tokyo and Okinawa over the past ten years. Some of these episodes were relayed to me as part of research for this particular article.

A father passing away and daughter conducting the funeral service.

‘A number of family members like my cousin were surprised by the fact that I led *gongyō* (the recitation of the 2nd and 16th chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*, followed by chanting) at the funeral ceremony for my father; some who were not Sōka Gakkai members asked if I could really do such a thing. Once, I explained, they did come to understand, and I actually taught some of them to do *gongyō* so they could join in during the funeral ceremony’, Michiko told me some six months after her father had passed away in 2012. We were in a suburb of Tokyo and sitting in front of her *but sudan*, the cabinet where the *gohonzon* is enshrined in SG members home. A picture of her father whom she was very close to stands next to the altar. When he had died in hospital, she was there, chanting softly next to him, and she sees his peaceful passing as a great benefit.

Michiko organised the funeral as the oldest child (and non-working daughter while her sister works full time). She decided to lead *gongyō* as ‘I really loved my father’. The fact that she as a woman and non-professional priest who would conduct the principal role made some family members inquire if a priest or perhaps some other more authoritative figure would not be more appropriate. This was after all, an extraordinary event that surely consisted of rituals to ensure the rite of passage of the ‘living spirit’ (*ikiryō*) as it leaves the body to form a dead spirit (*shirei*) (Inoue 2013). While such specific terminology was not used there was a general if vague sense that rituals conducted by a priest were more appropriate to facilitate a person’s spirit or soul entering its final resting place. They doubted how this ritual process could be conducted by a lay (female) person. Many presume in Japan, in line with a dual logic of spirits (*ibid.*), if only vaguely believe, that some authoritative ritual is needed to legitimate this last journey to join the *shirei* to become a *hotoke*, or ancestral kami although this is usually not expressed in a direct or doctrinal manner.

Michiko laughs, ‘they couldn’t quite believe that I could conduct such a ceremony by myself, but they of course didn’t know that what we would do at the funeral is not different from what we do every day.’ While a funeral ceremony is a special occasion, often a sombre event with most people wearing, formal black clothing as a sign of mourning and respect, and ‘it was a special event to me as my dear father had passed away,’ Michiko continues, ‘but in terms of him becoming a *hotoke* there is nothing outside the practice that we do every day. Nothing special is going to deliver him to somewhere outside his own karma. Of course we chant for him, but it is our own change in our relation with him (the belief in *engi* 縁起 ‘dependent origination’, or karmic link) that will influence his rebirth positively, not us changing his karma, or a ritual ensuring he becomes *hotoke*.’

When someone dies the first task is likely to be, as it was for Michiko, to contact a funeral company to help organise the body, the funeral and the cremation. Michiko chose a funeral company that was run by an SG member nearby based on a friend’s recommendation. The body was brought home for two days before being taken to the funeral parlour where Michiko also led *Otsuya* お通夜 a Buddhist

¹⁵ Formulated by T’ien-t’ai in *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra and the Great Concentration and Insight* that Nichiren follows.

traditional ceremony conducted before the night of cremation. Close family and friends also come to the house to chant and say goodbye.

The day after *Otsuya* the main funeral ceremony was held in a public place where about 30 people attended, mostly relatives. During chanting attendees would walk up to the coffin, and one by one offer a little incense while praying silently for the deceased. Afterwards, Michiko and others said a few words about her father, and someone read out a passage from Nichiren's writings and a message from Ikeda. The funeral service was meaningful to Michiko. The intensity that had suddenly engulfed her life had started with having to decide on a date (within around a week) appropriate for a funeral. The Japanese calendar has various 'not so good days', Michiko explains, when 'people feel they should not hold a funeral.' For example, *butsumetsu no hi* 仏滅の日, the cessation, or death of Buddha which is considered an unlucky day when people should not plan a wedding, and one should avoid having a funeral on *tomobiki* 友引 or Friendship days, because *tomobiki* means 'to pull friends' and would be considered bringing bad luck to those attending a funeral on such a day, like 'pulling a friend to the world of the dead'.¹⁶

Like other SG members Michiko does not believe in lucky or unlucky days, and she was unclear about what this system of thought actually meant, but she was advised by the funeral company to carefully consider the day because non-SG members attending the funeral may care about the specific day on which it is held. She wanted the funeral to be a positive experience and did not want non-SG members to think that an SG funeral would bring them bad luck. Michiko's father had a so-called 'friends funeral' (*yujin-so* 友人葬), or 'funeral among friends'. Friends Funerals vary, but usually contain the recitations of the *Lotus Sūtra* and chanting the *daimoku*. They are organised by members themselves although members often request local leaders to lead the ceremony. These became increasingly popular as the organisation grew and became the norm after the SG was excommunicated by the priesthood in 1991.

A grandmother dying in a nursing home

The social relations to the deceased are visible, as elsewhere (De Antoni and Raveri 2017, pp. 14–15), in the case of SG funerals. Did the deceased connect with friends and family on a deeper and more meaningful level? What was the nature of relationships with colleagues, with people in the neighbourhood? Was the deceased needed, appreciated or disliked? Relational histories that intertwine a deceased person's life tends to manifest upon death. That emotional life and memories that is the core of people's relationships easily make their way into the atmosphere of a funeral. Although the format of the ceremony may be the same, the experience of a funeral may be quite unique, as the two examples below demonstrate.

The first is an account from a SG member, who lives in West Tokyo, and who was interviewed for this research on several occasions in 2019 as she told of recently attending the funeral of her husband's 92-year old grandmother. Midori described a state of emotional 'heaviness' even though she did not know the deceased. She knew the grandmother had been a person dominated by a life-state of anger. Midori knew from her mother-in-law and her husband that the anger had often been directed at perceived social injustices (seen as a positive form for anger in SG), but also that this quickly could spill over to criticising others. After the funeral, on the three-hour journey home, Midori and her husband, felt emotionally low and got into an argument. As this passed, they began feeling that they must chant for her. Anger as self-righteous or that lacks self-reflection is felt to be a negative destructive tendency, and there was a feeling of regret surrounding the grandmother's life, as a person who had not quite done, perhaps, her human revolution. She wished they had had more time to chant at the funeral ceremony itself to turn it into a more positive experience, but the nursing home where the grandmother had died did not allow what they considered 'religious' ceremonies such as an SG funeral would be presumed to be as perceived by all parties involved.

¹⁶ For Japanese calendar that a funeral company would use see <http://www.ajnet.ne.jp/diary/>.

Indeed, SG may be typically what people have in mind in Japan as the biggest group classified under the category ‘new religion’, a category towards which often negative perceptions persist with the term ‘religion’ sometimes used as a form of derision (see Horii 2018). Gakkai members are generally aware of the negative assumptions associated with the idea of ‘religion’ and would be reluctant to create any unnecessary social tension. Since the grandmother died in the nursing home it had seemed practical to keep the body there until the funeral and since most of her remaining friends lived in the nursing home. She died on a Tuesday and was cremated five days later. The funeral company recommended by the nursing home cleaned and prepared the body for an open coffin, and kept the coffin in a special room in the nursing home so friends and family could come to say their goodbyes.

A ‘farewell’ ceremony was held before the family accompanied the body to the funeral parlour. Although ‘what we all really needed to lift our spirits and somehow transform this heaviness that everyone felt surrounded this death’, Midori explained, the nursing home allowed only a small, ‘non-religious’ ceremony to take place directed by the funeral company. Each family member was directed to say a few words, and attendees took a flower each that had been prepared by the nursing home to place on the body while saying their goodbyes. The leftover flowers were placed on the deceased and the coffin closed by the funeral company, after which family members went with the body to the crematorium, a 15 min-drive away from the nursing home.

As they arrived at the crematorium, they entered a room to wait for their number to be called, after which they went into a large room with ten rows of ovens. Standing in front of the oven where the grandmother was being cremated, they burned incense in a holder at a small table and finally chanted together. This lasted for about ten minutes after which they went to another building where the reception was held. Here they were served high quality Japanese traditional food. Everybody was wearing black, and after a brief time talking about the grandmother, most family members began chatting about other things, rejoicing in their reunion as it was some time since they last had the opportunity to meet. Perhaps the catching up and meeting a new-born nephew amongst them helped lift the heavy feelings.

After eating they went back to the crematorium to be presented with the bones, which lay as the body had been cremated, the outline still visible and still hot. A funeral official explained which bone belonged to which body part—the feet, the hips, the head, and the hyoid bone in the neck which some believe to be the most significant. This bone facilitates speech or sound, as a vital part of transmission of the Buddhist teachings, and sound also in SG is seen to connect everything as is indicated by the character *kyō* in *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*. The family members, now in pairs, each with a set of special chopsticks transferred two bones each to the urn as the funeral official watched before transferring the rest. With the help of a colleague they broke the bones too big to fit into the urn. Midori said this made her feel extremely uncomfortable as it was as if ‘this is all that is left of you, just ashes’. The urn would later be placed in the family grave.

Celebrating the joy of a dearly beloved care-taker *Otōsan*.

The next episode is also from Midori who attended the above grandmother’s funeral, but this funeral was a truly enjoyable experience. Positive energy filled the funeral service as hundreds of people who had gathered to remember the deceased man whom students fondly called *Otōsan* (father). Both the grandmother and *Otōsan* were SG members, but as Midori described it, the funeral was a very different experience. *Otōsan* was the long-term caretaker of one of the Soka University dormitories where around 40 female foreign and Japanese students would stay as they entered university, usually for a year. Both *Otōsan* and his wife were kind of substitute parents for the young students. *Otōsan* was strict about keeping the place tidy and in making students participate in evacuation drills; sometime students would get annoyed when he told them off for smoking in the wrong places and so on. Over the year, however, many students developed a deep sense of appreciation as they experienced the extent to which he took care of them. The couple lived in a tiny flat inside the dormitory, which meant they were always available, even during the night should a student fall ill or need help in any way. Both *Otōsan* and *Okaasan* chanted several hours each day for the welfare of the students. Even as he

prohibited them from bringing their boyfriend into the dorm or scolded them for not cleaning the ashtray or other areas of the common room, *Otōsan* was someone students would remember fondly as he cared for them as if they were his own children.

When he died, fairly young in his early 70s, hundreds of former students and staff from the university attended the funeral. Hundreds of messages were sent from overseas and from across Japan from those unable to attend his funeral, which was organised by the university. His 'life state' as a person who chanted several hours daily people described as *seimei ryoku ga atta* 生命力があった, literally as 'having life power'. Everyone seemed energised at his funeral too as they reminisced about him. While they were sad at his passing, people remembered happily times in the past and the profound impact this man had on their life at a special time when they lived abroad, often away from their family for the first time. Midori who attended the funeral as one of the former students under his care described the event as 'so much energy filling the air'. The funeral ceremony was full of memories being shared, pictures of *Otōsan* with students, and a long message from Ikeda thanking him for his care for students over many years. His 'life power' was felt as the compassionate life he had led as people laughed about his strictness but appreciated his good-intentions and care for them. Having myself lived in the dormitory for one year when I studied Japanese at Soka University in 2001, I knew exactly what Midori was talking about, as I also was one of those students that had been touched by his and his wife's care for us.

This kind of effect people leave behind matters, and will be seen to determine where people go next. Funerals are always unique in this way. Despite the same rituals of *gongyō* being performed they vary in meaning and emotions and while they will be more ceremonious, and characterised by remembrance of the life of the deceased they do not essentially differ from the daily practice of chanting and recitation that members do every day. 'Mortuary rites' that are seen to deliver people as *hotoke* in the way commonly understood in Japan is not visible at SG funerals as no such beliefs exist.

Memorial Cemetery Parks in Sōka Gakkai.

In SG, a Buddhist funeral may, as indicated by Michiko, be a ceremony led by a family member of the deceased; more commonly, members ask their local leader whom they are close to, or to whom the deceased was close to lead *gongyō*. Occasionally there are deceased who were members in name only and may not be known to local people. The family of that person may still request an SG funeral, and inform the organisation of the person's passing. In such cases an SG local leader will be nominated to conduct *gongyō* and lead the funeral ceremony which also will include reading passages from Nichiren's writing and a message from Ikeda.

Other concerns include what kind of *nōkotsudō* (columbarium) will store the urn, which will depend upon arrangements put in place by the family or the deceased person. SG sees its role as a supporter of such individual wishes, as in the case of Michiko, who did not live near an SG cemetery. Although a family grave existed in Nagano, given the distance from Tokyo her main concern was for her children having to take care of it in the future. Michiko therefore opted to purchase a gravestone in the local, public cemetery close to their house. This cost her around 500,000 yen, which is relatively cheap compared to many graveyards in central Tokyo that can cost four or five times that much, while some sell for even as much as ten million yen in famous cemeteries. The rise in the number of people in Japan who choose to scatter the ashes is at least partly due to the cost of buying and maintaining a family grave.

However, there are still many temples in Japan, and places where one can 'leave the bones of ancestors', as expressed by the staff from one of the SG cemeteries who explained that it is common for families to visit a grave several times a year. Many religious corporations including temples have their own graveyards. SG also established its first cemetery in October 1977 named *Kinen Bochi* 記念墓地, or Memorial Park Cemetery, usually referred to as simply memorial park in English.¹⁷ The first

¹⁷ For basic information for all Soka Gakkai Memorial Park Cemeteries https://www.sokanet.jp/memorial_park/pk/12/.

memorial park was constructed in Atsuda, Hokkaido, the hometown of second SG President Toda. Today this has become one of the biggest cherry blossoms viewing places in Hokkaido. Thirteen other such memorial parks have since been built and SG owns and permanently manages these as a religious corporation. Families who buy a tomb have the right to own it in perpetuity. Permanent ownership rights and permanent use cannot be transferred to others, but belong to the person who bought it who without special permission would not be able to legally sell it or legally transfer it to someone else. This follows the standard cemetery practices in Japan. The fourteen cemeteries contain around 435,000 family graves and nineteen *nōkotsudō* 納骨堂, or ossuary (five for family use with 283,000 spaces, and fourteen for communal use). A family *nōkotsudō* holding two urns costs 315,000 yen, and 490,000 yen for one that holds up to four urns. A communal ossuary is only 50,000 yen (Duteil-Ogata 2012). With funeral plots commonly costing on average around 2 million yen these prices are comparatively cheap.

The Atsuda Memorial Cemetery Park was the first in Japan, to have one standardised size and shape of the gravestones. Japanese graveyards are often associated with ‘darkness’ as this is the image of death, and being in touch with death has a long history of ideas about “contamination”. Graveyards were not a place people would choose to go, nor, as some of my interviewees said, be perceived as a desirable place to rest after they die. When SG had to accommodate its growing membership Ikeda, then third president, presented the idea that ‘both life and death should be a joy’ (*sei mo kankishi, mo kanki itte iu* 生も歡喜, 死も歡喜) in accordance with Nichiren’s understanding of life and death as part of the cycle of life itself, or the Middle Way. In line with this thinking the image of the SG cemetery was modelled after the America Arlington public cemeteries, and efforts were made to create a brighter atmosphere to dispel the typical image of ‘darkness’ as a place of the unknown and sadness (see Figure 2). This was particularly the case in Okinawa as explained in an interview in August 2019 by recently retired Ikema Toshihiko. Ikema became the caretaker of the Okinawa Memorial Cemetery Peace Park 沖縄平和記念墓地 when it was established in 1999 remaining until he retired in 2018. When SG President Ikeda visited for the opening in February of that year, he described the Okinawa memorial park as ‘the great palace of oneness of life and death of the comrades for peace’ (Seikyo Newspaper 1999, p. 3).

Ikema explains, that three key principles reflect the objective to build the cemeteries in a way that symbolically show the Buddhist principles promoted in SG that centres on the significance of each individual life: (1) Brightness (*akarusa* 明るさ), (2) equality (*byōdōsei* 平等性), and (3) homeostasis (*kōjyōsei* 恒常性). ‘The “brightness” of the place should make you feel refreshed’, explains Ikema, and ‘the idea that whatever one’s status in life had been, rich or poor is irrelevant; that everyone is equal as a human being is symbolically represented by the same size gravestone’ (interview with author in Naha August 2019). Bigger size graves cannot be bought. Equal sized gravestones serve to represent equality, compared to the tradition where gravestones usually reflect the material wealth and status of a particular family. The emphasis on homeostasis refers to the homeostasis between life and death, ‘just like the fairly stable equilibrium between interdependent physiological elements or stellar planets’ Ikema elaborates. The memorial park is designed with the principles of brightness (the brilliance of life’s potential), equality, and eternity to reflect SG’s reading of the 16th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Fourteen such memorial parks exist in Japan, and also some overseas such as in South Korea. These memorial parks apart from serving as cemeteries, may reflect members lives being memorialised as part of the history they created. When asked, members in Okinawa whose memorial park I visited as part of the research for this article, tell of how much they appreciate the cemetery, however not because it was seen to memorialise them but because it contrasted so sharply with typical graves in Okinawa.



Figure 2. SG Okinawa Memorial Cemetery Park (picture by author).

Okinawan turtleback shaped tombs are visible everywhere on road sides and in mountain areas as well as in urban spaces as cities had to be built around them. In the countryside the graves are often overgrown and imagined as places no one really wants to go, not the least because there is an ever-present danger of encountering a *habu* (Okinawa snake the bite of which is fatal if not treated immediately). *Habu* and graves are intricately connected in the image of the ‘darkness’ and danger lurking from somewhere unseen. In the past, when families paid visits to graves for the yearly Obon Festival for example (a festival held in August to honour the spirits of one’s ancestors) they had to cut down overgrowth before being able to settle down to clean the bones and celebrate their ancestors. Ikema explains, ‘even though the memorial park is in a mountain ridge, relatives who are not members sometimes gather during Obon or come to attend a funeral service, and they comment on the beauty of the *Kinen Bochi*. They often also inquire about the availability of gravestones’, which however are only available to members.¹⁸

SG cemeteries indeed feel akin to a memorial peace park. The open, expansive fields of neat rows of graves, and the panoramic view of the Okinawan ocean ‘makes you breathe and feel alive again, and think deeply about the preciousness of life’ as one young male member told me (see Figure 3). Thus, people who visit family graves may also come to feel refreshed after their visit. Such experiences were told by many visitors over the years to Ikema, which made him sometimes joke during speeches he would give at SG meetings as one of the Okinawa general leaders, ‘if you are an old tired couple who may have a history of quarrelling you should go to the *Kinen Bochi* and see, if you can still continue to fight there? It seems a silly thing to say or do but everyone used to laugh and knew exactly what I was talking about, going there makes you think deeper about the significance of life, which in return makes

¹⁸ Interview with author in Naha, August 2019.

you feel refreshed.’ He continues, ‘this is what Ikeda-sensei had in mind—when people come to the cemetery park to visit the grave of their relatives, they will come to think about life again. So even though of course various problems may remain, coming here is a way to want to move forward, it is a kind of resurrection of life-spirit 命がよみがえる. Or, resuscitation (*sosei* 蘇生)’ he explains. (interview August 2019).



Figure 3. View from the Okinawa Memorial Cemetery Park (picture by author).

Tsunegawa Taigo, a man in his thirties and a staff member working at the memorial park explained in an interview when I visited in August 2019 that visitors who come to hold memorials with other relatives and take part in ceremonial *gongyō* in the chapel (constructed for that purpose see Figure 4) often comment on their positive experience of visiting the *Kinen Bochi*. This chapel is open to members who visit to chant after visiting the graves (see Figure 4). Sometimes, Tsunegawa explains, when members come to deposit the ashes 40 to 50 relatives may attend the funeral ceremony, half of whom may not be SG members. ‘Such visitors to the Memorial Park who come for the first time sometimes say they have changed their awareness of Sōka Gakkai (in a positive way)’.

Ikema also told of how people who were not SG members began to spread the word about the *Kinen Bochi*. In fact, the SG memorial park became a reference point for thinking about future graveyard layout and grave formats, Ikema explains. Around 2017, he was asked by a government official in the prefecture to help re-design standard cemetery parks on the main island of Okinawa, Miyako, and Yaeyama to make them more like the SG memorial park. The attraction is linked to this change in image from the common association of ‘darkness’, ‘finality’, or ‘pollution’ to one of ‘death’ as bright and pleasant, even refreshing, and which reminds people of a peace park, a place for contemplating the preciousness of life. Ikema sees this as a positive influence, a kind of ‘graveyard revolution’.



Figure 4. SG Chapel in Okinawa Memorial Cemetery Park (picture by author).

4. Life-Death as a Dialectical Process for *Kōsen-rufu*

People in Japan, China and Korea and beyond generally have strong feelings towards their deceased relatives and ancestors. Reverence for ancestors and ancestral spirits permeate many aspects of Japanese culture. Takeda (1957) in his book on ancestor worship pointed to the emotional attitude towards the deceased as being natural to most Japanese rather than relating to any doctrinal principle. The importance of ancestors (*senzo*), the family grave (*haka*), and the bones (*hone*) of deceased family members, as explained by one of the vice-presidents of SG, Tom Sugiyama in July 2019,¹⁹ also resonates with SG members in that they feel the deceased should be treated appropriately and respectfully. Such sentiments are also expressed when a picture of the deceased is placed next to the Buddhist altar as people chant for the deceased. These beliefs and attitudes are rooted in Confucian thought, Sugiyama acknowledges, and are part of the cultural mores of Japanese society, which naturally resonate with SG members in Japan as well.

While the sense that ancestors should be treated respectfully has a long tradition, a long-established social practice that regards death, blood, and funerals as “polluting”, or cause *kegare* (defilement) have co-existed. I never heard, however, such ideas expressed in SG, and when I asked specifically, Michiko for example adamantly denied such sentiments amongst SG members, and referring more generally to Japanese society when she says, ‘no one believes that anymore’, stressing that these were very ‘old-fashioned’ attitudes. Asking the same question to young Soka University students, most had never heard of or thought of such ideas. This change in sensibility towards death and funerals in society at large, as suggested by Suzuki (2003) is linked to the rise of the funeral industry which

¹⁹ Interview with author in Tokyo 8 July 2019.

replaced community involvement in funerals and decreased the contact people had with death as it became a professional service.

Certainly, in the case of SG, rather than notions about pollution or ancestors joining the ranks of ancestral spirits, they link their actions for *kōsen-rufu* to perceptions of death. One woman in her sixties from Chiba explains: '*kōsen-rufu* makes me think that death cannot be a negative thing, or it would mean your life would end in failure. Since the point of Buddhist practice, as Ikeda sensei says, is to be victorious as a human being, death cannot be a failure, something dark or negative that happens at the end of your life.' The perception of how one is perceived to die 'victorious' is indicated by *Otōsan's* funeral. *Otōsan* was perceived by other members as someone having lived for *kōsen-rufu*, and who saw himself as such a person. He chanted every day, he lived with a sense of mission that made him prioritise particular ways, he felt it was his responsibility to take care of the young students, and even had a sense of historical purpose that was linked to his support for Soka University as having been established by Ikeda. This, surprisingly perhaps, did not mean directly talking about the teachings of Nichiren. In fact, there is a strict policy against proselytising to non-members at the university, which may result in an increased focus on demonstrating through one's behaviour what it means to SG members to practice Nichiren Buddhism. This will be seen as trying to maintain a belief that all people possess infinite potential according to the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, that also shows that change is the dynamics of life itself.

The objective of *kōsen-rufu* is also perceived in other indirect ways, as a cross-generational endeavour in 'buddha' behaviour that may not always link directly to the spreading of the teachings of Nichiren but often indirectly to this perception of one's 'buddha' behaviour. This is perceived as meaningful because if revealing the buddha consciousness is the way to overcome human suffering, seen to originate in a 'delusion' about the lack of worth of one's own life and the 'delusion' that life is finite believing and acting to the contrary is acting from a state of 'enlightenment'. In reality, believing in an eternal life–death cycle and human life as containing infinite potential is also the biggest existential challenge. This moral dynamic of self/other-and-time centres on individual integrity as being significant because it directs how a person sees self–other as a relationship of mutuality according to the law of cause and effect. This is reflected in funeral services, elaborate or not, perceived to secure a person's salvation, a kind of vindication (or not) of their existence, according to how they lived their life.

In Japan, with the economic boom of the 1970s, costs and the formality of funeral ceremonies increased. New, more lavish styles developed, which however, during the economic downturn made many Buddhist mortuary rites seem increasingly meaningless. In the new millennium such commercial, highly costly practices came under increasing critique (Shimada 2010). Organising a traditional funeral indeed requires money and effort as Noriko, a daughter in her sixties, who is not an SG member, explains. When her mother died in 2018 at the age of 90, Noriko contacted her local Pure Land School of Buddhism to which her mother, and by extension herself, belonged in a suburb in west Tokyo where they live. She also contracted a local funeral company to organise the body and carry out other services such as transportation of the body to the public crematorium and hall where the funeral and *Otsuya* were held. The funeral cost in total something in the range of 3–4 million yen, which included 700,000 yen donated to the priest for conducting funeral rituals at the *Otsuya* and at the main funeral ceremony (but not the cost of a grave). Noriko did not regret spending the money despite her relatively low income as a part-time private tutor. This funeral ceremony conducted by an ordained priest made her feel she was showing her final respect and sense of filial duty to her mother, who had been a former high-school teacher and was known in her community, although the rituals meant little to Noriko personally. She was very pleased with how beautiful the funeral company had made her mother look, even 'more beautiful than she looked when alive' she told me in September 2019. Her mother looking so beautiful and having died simply from old age she felt was a sign that her mother had returned to where she came from—to *tenju* 天寿, which means 'natural life' but includes the meaning that life comes from heaven (天).

Emotional life intersects with many culturally specific ways of experiencing death in Japan where concerns about public representations of self are highly significant. Wider demographic changes such as a rapidly aging population (*kōreika*), declining birth rate (*shōshika*), rural depopulation (*kasoka*), and the nuclearization of the family (*kakukazokuka*) which is also now in decline in Japan, indicated this may be changing in significant ways. Suzuki in an edited volume describes a general shift as people have become ‘psychologically proactive in the process of their own dying and death ways’ (Suzuki 2013, p. 3), where the ‘deceased-to-be is becoming the *social agent*’ of their own ways to die (ibid. cf. Yanagida 1997). This intercepts with the increasing emphasis on the now ubiquitous theme in public discourse of the (negatively perceived) rising demands from the elder population who feel strongly that they do not want to be a burden on their children or the state.

The biggest difference between past and contemporary funerals is the way logistical support is now carried out by the funeral industry (Shimane 2001). Funeral companies are also commonly used in SG as indicated by the ethnographies above. As Japan urbanised in the postwar era, and particularly in the high growth era of Japan (1955–73), professional companies replaced funeral events that in the past were organised by communities. The funeral industry was able to ignore the central notion of *kegare* ケガレ, or perception of defilement associated for so long in Japan with death. Some modern funeral companies developed the custom of giving funeral attendees a small packet of salt to sprinkle in the entrance of their house upon the return from a funeral, so as to ‘purify’ them from the ‘contamination’ incurred from having been in contact with death. As professional, commercialised funeral practices eroded the need for communities to get involved, ceremonies, rituals and schedules also became organised by professionals, and with that a lessening need to show fear of contamination. This new standardization, efficiency, and control by the funeral industry Suzuki (2003) describes as “McFunerals”.

Standardisation and the planning of one’s own death and dying are visible in SG, while at the same time cross-generational and SG community involvement also remains. The elderly may buy gravestones or more likely a *nōkotsudō*. This could be in one of the SG memorial parks, in a local public cemetery, or if practically possible, maintain a family grave. Families remain mostly directly involved with funeral proceedings and some with the ceremony of *gongyō* itself. However, with the rise of McFunerals the emphasis on new ‘proper’ rites also increased such as emphasising the ‘correct’ ways to place the corpse in the coffin (*nōkan* 納棺) or specific rituals such as washing the body (Shimane 2001). As discussed, such rituals though sometimes present as part of the service provided by a particular funeral company were however not of primary significance in SG.

Importantly, in SG none of these rituals represented necessary rites to facilitate the entry to the dead spirit world (*shirei*) or to become ancestor *kami*, or indeed as a way to enter nirvana (*nehan*). What matters for active SG members is conducting *gongyō* at the funeral, and to chant for the deceased, just as they do every day as their Buddhist practice. A funeral service to commemorate the deceased is important, but how the deceased is perceived to have led a ‘victorious’ life in terms of their social action and attitude to life trumps ritual aspects. Perceptions of a deceased person, as explained by some members, to not have been active or a member of SG could motivate them to increase their own effort for *kōsen-rufu* so the death of that person becomes a cause for victory for the deceased in the future (meaning that they would practice Nichiren Buddhism as taught in the SG in the future). This reflects a deeply felt interconnection between both life and death, as well as between oneself and one’s significant others in line with the idea of *engi*, but not in the commonly understood way of connecting through ancestor *kami*.

How mortality is considered and approached is always culturally specific and circumstantial. In whatever form ‘traditional’ or ‘orthodox’ rituals are presented, they remain invented both in the sense of the concept of *Invented Traditions* put forward by (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and by the fact that they are cultural artefacts, practices, and expressions of intentions and emotions that may change in different settings. More recently, as pointed out by the McFuneral phenomenon some rituals lost meaning as they became increasingly professionalised and costly, leading some people to seek

new ways to deal with the social and emotional transition that takes place in human relationships and circumstances in relation to the death of someone.

The view of life and death as a continuous process, and of parents and children and one's significant others as having a close karmic relation, reveal perceptions of 'self' as of a temporary and interdependent nature as indicated by the concept of the 'truth of temporary existence'. This does not mean that a person's actions are seen as insignificant, nor that a person leaves nothing behind. SG has contested the ideology of the secular-religious binary and rejected the notion of 'faith' as anything other than about the inner realm, about a consciousness of 'entering the palace of oneself' as would be how SG interpret Nichiren (WND 1999, p. 787). SG members develop perceptions of 'life' as something deeper than the material appearance of seeming duality between self and others. Rather interdependence is regarded as a reality. Developing a consciousness of interdependence and eternity of existence is regarded as part of developing the ability to become what Nichiren writes in 1271 'the master of one's own mind' (WND 1999, p. 389) that is often discussed at meetings as essential to Buddhist practice. They also describe this as something most fundamentally challenged by the ultimate existential question of death. Simultaneously they may quote a much studied Nichiren writing that has been entitled *The Gift of Rice* to promote the view that 'The true path lies in the affairs of this world' (WND 1999, p. 1126). Such writings are studied to spur themselves on to believe in the significance of their own life and social action. A consciousness of interdependence shapes temporal social action, which when interpreted as working for *kōsen-rufu* is considered the ultimate form for 'value-creation' (the meaning of Sōka 創価). What that exactly means remains an empirical question but as (Mathews 2013) shows, Japanese people's attitudes, at least for his interlocutors, towards what drives them in life, their *ikigai* or sense of purpose, is related to their view of death, which seems to profoundly affect how people live their lives. This is why he concludes that, 'The existential is political: envisioning heaven means the shaping of earth' (Mathews 2013, p. 45).

How one acts as a 'bodhisattva' or 'buddha', in whatever shape that is perceived as appropriate, is presented as the key objective of Buddhist practice in SG. 'Buddhahood', as only attainable through one's own 'faith' and action is fundamentally different from common ideas about *hotoke* as something one becomes upon death. Mortuary rites have a long history in Japan that transmits such purposes of deliverance. However, death in SG is perceived as the entry into a state of temporary 'non-appearance', the nature of whose reappearance depends upon one's present actions. *Hotoke* is thus not something that can be mediated by particular rites but depends solely upon one's own faith and actions. A much-studied writing of Nichiren in SG, the *Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life* (1272) is taken to explain such an approach to death and to what *hotoke* is:

'Be resolved to summon forth the great power of faith, and chant Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō with the prayer that your faith will be steadfast and correct at the moment of death. Never seek any other way to inherit the ultimate Law of life and death, and manifest it in your life. Only then will you realise that earthly desires are enlightenment, and that the suffering of birth and death are nirvana. Even embracing the Lotus Sūtra would be useless without the heritage of faith.' (WND 1999, p. 218).

Using such particular concepts and attitudes towards death shape their behaviour and identity in the present moment, the 'political' or present existence, but through a non-dualistic approach to death and one's relations with others as one's own identity and behaviour simultaneously become the very place of transcendence.

5. Conclusions

For those who interpret their own life as integral to the realisation of a 'buddha movement' they seek to actualise what they see as the 'buddha's behaviour' expressed as their 'sense of mission to work for *kōsen-rufu*'. This is frequently heard mentioned at meetings and amongst those interviewed for this paper who believed one's attitude in life to be the most essential issue at the time of death.

Their *ikigai* comes from perceiving themselves as persons who exist in a particular time and space but who aim to take actions from the perspective of the 'bigger self' that is seen to engage in a broader, cross-generational endeavour that creates the history of their organization which objective is perceived to be *kōsen-rufu* in its various manifestations. This is a dialectical of life and death, of past, present and future that becomes meaningful as intention and actions become a collective movement that is significant for them exactly because it is perceived to matter for the future of others which also relates to oneself. Through Buddhist practice that works on inner transformation or human revolution one is trying to go beyond the smaller 'self' of everyday concerns to reveal one's 'bigger self' that can supposedly benefit others in helping them reveal their 'bigger self'. It is not that this ideal will not inevitably deviate from reality, at least some of the time, but this moral, normative order is one that may come to the fore particularly at times of death and during funerals as the life of a person's character and actions are condensed into that time and space.

As is the case with many contemporary Japanese funerals, family and friends may or may not play active roles depending on the extent to which ceremonies are orchestrated by professionals (Suzuki 2013, p. 4). SG funerals are still often conducted by family members, or assisted by fellow leaders in their local SG communities, but much is also left to funeral companies to organise. However, different to common Buddhist views of death in Japan (that there may be many lives but also a final death achieved upon entry to *nirvana*) a different perception of death fundamentally shapes Buddhist practice and the purpose for which people live their lives in and for SG. Nichiren's concept of death, like that of Dogen Kigen (1200–1253), is one that hinges on life–death as a dialectical relation, where death is not a final abode upon entry to *nirvana*, but rather is qualified by the manifestation of the buddha life-state, or perceived consciousness of such in one's actions. What kind of understanding of death the individual has intricately links to the kind of life they lead, 'how they practice living' that is regarded as crucially important in SG and why Nichiren is seen as urging people to not be complacent as they quote him, 'No place is secure. Be convinced that Buddhahood is the final abode' (WND 1999, p. 491).

Ultimately, the inner state of 'buddha' consciousness is promoted to be central to the very cycle of life and death, where the past is seen to exist in the present which carries in its entirety everything that happened in the past. For SG members, (Nichiren 1272) is seen to point to this when he says, quoting another Sūtra: 'If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the result as they are manifest in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be manifested in the future, look at the cause that exist in the present' (WND 1999, p. 279). The present moment is in this way thought of as a complex dialectical between the past, the present and the future, the awareness of which characterises approaches to death and funeral practices in SG.

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