

# Learning From a Friend

## Jeff Farr reflects on the passing of his friend and coworker Shin Yatomi.

By JEFF FARR  
Editor

Many people asked me how I was doing after Shin Yatomi's death. I always said I was OK, though I was actually not sure. It was like I was OK and *not* OK at the same time. On the one hand, I was in awe of the way he brought his life to a beautiful, victorious conclusion. His fighting spirit never waned, and when he knew the end was near, he continued to joyfully express his resolve to fight for *kosen-rufu* in the next life and through eternity. He encouraged those who came to encourage him in the hospital, displaying a warm sense of humor.

But I was also deeply saddened by his passing. The grief flowing from deep inside me would not stop.

His ancient blue Nissan Sentra, surfboard rack on top, is still here in the SGI Plaza parking lot. Every time I pass it, I think he is going to

step out with a smile. Whenever I see a picture of him, it chokes me up. *I will never get to crack jokes with him again*, I think.

Nichiren Daishonin's writings have been encouraging me that, in facing this kind of loss, it is OK to feel OK and not OK. In many passages, Nichiren describes death for a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra as a joyful thing to work toward. In others, he expresses his anguish over the loss of friends.

For instance, he encourages one of his followers to, at the moment of death, "hasten to the summit of perfect enlightenment, and look around you in all directions. The entire realm of phenomena will have changed into the Land of Tranquil Light" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 843).

But we also find him sympathizing with a mother grieving over the death of her son: "The aged mother remains behind, while the young son has departed. How heartless is the transience of the world!" (WND-1, 1077).

Death is both a new beginning and an inevitable cause of suffering, Nichiren makes clear in his writings. He inspires us with confidence in the eternity of life while

acknowledging that the sorrow naturally accompanying death is not easily overcome.

After Shin died peacefully, surrounded by his wife, mother and sister and the sound of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, people began to come in to say their goodbyes to him in his hospital room. I reached for his right hand. He had used this hand, I reminded myself, to write and translate so many great articles and encourage the SGI-USA members.

He was turning in articles — and thinking up ideas for more articles — until the very end. This was not something anyone asked him to do, but the articles kept coming.

I felt sad that this hand would never write again. But I also felt that his determination to write — to keep fighting for American *kosen-rufu* — was alive. It seemed to still be in his hand, in the room and, in the days since, everywhere I go.

Shin left this life with a pure, burning determination for *kosen-rufu*. For me, the real meaning of Shin's death is turning both how he inspired me and how much I miss him into a new determination to widely share this great Buddhism. As Nichiren Buddhists, this is what we do — turn unimaginable loss into unbeatable determination, thus changing the very meaning of that loss. **WT**

