

5 Easy Steps for Leading Book Discussions

Excerpted from Reading Group Choices
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1 Acknowledge your role as “facilitator”—not expert.

If it's your turn to lead the discussion, know that you are not expected to be an authority or expert on the chosen book. Your primary tasks are to open the discussion, keep it going, maintain a lively dialogue, and end the discussion on time. A great book discussion is the result of the thoughts and perceptions of a variety of different people.

2 Note your own response as you read.

Make notes as you read the book, highlighting or marking passages. What are your reactions, questions or insights? Add the personal touch to your discussion. Share your thoughts during your discussion and invite others to comment.

3 Lay some ground rules.

After you've introduced yourself to the group, remind members of the ways they can contribute to the discussion:

- Avoid “crosstalk” or talking over others.
- Be respectful. Keep an open mind.
- Try not to repeat what others have said. Speak up with something new or add to the previous comment.
- Acknowledge that there is no right or wrong, just differences of opinion.
- Be open to learn from others.
- If you are outgoing, be careful to allow space for others to share their thoughts.

4 Call the question.

If you feel the group has begun to repeat itself, acknowledge your observation, ask for agreement if necessary, and pose a new topic.

5 Balance the discussion.

Invite quiet members to share their thoughts. Watch for introverts who have something to say but are having a hard time getting in a word.

Praise for *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth & Death*

“An inspirational guide offering wisdom to cope with the terrible tragedies of life as well as the frustrations of daily minutiae. *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth & Death. . .and Everything in Between* is a superb treatise of faith and the human condition from a Buddhist perspective.”

—Midwest Book Review

“In this slender volume, Ikeda presents a wealth of profound information in a clear and straightforward style that can be easily absorbed by the interested lay reader. His life's work, and the underlying purpose of this book, is simply to help human beings to derive the maximum meaning from their lives through the study of Buddhism.”

—ForeWord magazine

Host a Reading Group

Reading group discussions—in your home, at a bookstore or in a library—are great opportunities to learn something new, see things in a new way, examine deeply held beliefs or simply enjoy the company of other book lovers. Middleway Press is happy to provide this discussion guide, which gives you everything you need to host a successful meeting: a descriptive summary, topics to consider, endorsements and hosting tips.

For more copies of this guide, or guides for other great Middleway Press books, contact us at:

Middleway Press

606 Wilshire Blvd.
Santa Monica, CA 90401
Tel: (310) 260-8900

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

UNLOCKING THE MYSTERIES OF BIRTH & DEATH

AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN
A BUDDHIST VIEW OF LIFE
SECOND EDITION

DAISAKU IKEDA

*Unlocking the Mysteries
of Birth & Death
. . . and Everything in Between:
A Buddhist View of Life*

By Daisaku Ikeda

MIDDLEWAY
PRESS

About the Book

Why is it so common that people fear death, even when many feel there is something greater beyond our existence on Earth? Many who have faced death or cared for a dying loved one have experienced profound changes in how they view—and live—life. In *Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth & Death*, we learn the philosophical intricacies of life and the wonder inherent in the phases of birth, aging and death. Explored through core concepts of Nichiren Buddhism, the profundity of human existence unfolds and we learn about the tools we need to fully appreciate the connectedness of all beings, revolutionize our spiritual lives, and meet each day of our lives with new insights and deeper understanding. Enjoying every possible moment of life is the purpose of practicing Buddhism.

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About the Author

DAISAKU IKEDA is an inspirational leader for millions and has worked to spread the peaceful and compassionate teachings of Buddhism throughout the world over his more than 50 years of practicing Nichiren Buddhism and 40 years of worldwide leadership of the Soka Gakkai International.

With 12 million members in nearly 200 countries, the SGI promotes education, international cultural exchange and the establishment of world peace. The SGI philosophy is based on the teachings of Nichiren, a thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist teacher and reformer who, based on the Lotus Sutra, taught the sanctity of human life above all else.

Mr. Ikeda is also the founder of numerous cultural and educational institutions throughout the world and has written numerous books on Buddhism and its application to daily life and world issues, including the award-winning *For the Sake of Peace*.

TOPICS TO CONSIDER

- 1 In the preface, Ikeda begins with the Latin phrase *memento mori*—remember that you must die. What is your initial reaction to this phrase? Popular culture in the western world is filled with negative images of death...just imagine those birthday cards meant for those turning 40 or 50. What beliefs feed the fear of dying?
- 2 If life emerges whenever conditions are “right” (pp. 22–23), how can we make sense of physical birth defects? Discuss the difficulties new medical technologies present for parents faced with determining the continuation of life. Is there a positive role physical defects can play in the course of life?
- 3 The concept of the four stages of life—birth, life, death, and life between death and rebirth—and the understanding that we repeat these stages eternally is central to Buddhism. How is this concept consistent with the cycles we see in the natural world?
- 4 The treasure tower indicates “each person’s life is a cluster of jewels,” something infinitely precious (pp. 21–22 and 185–86). Were there people who communicated similar messages to you in your formative years? Was this true of the faith tradition that influenced you when you were young?
- 5 If we each create our own good and bad karma by our past thoughts, speech and actions (p. 26), how does this concept influence what you choose to think, say and do today? If the karma that exists at death will determine one’s basic life-condition in the next lifetime, what issues do you have that you wish to address in this lifetime between now and the time you die?
- 6 What is your view of the role of suffering after reading *Unlocking the Mysteries*? What will it signal to you about your path?
- 7 In the section “The Third Stage of Life,” (p. 42) Ikeda suggests that whether our old age is a “bitter winter” or a “golden time” depends largely on our attitude. How do you feel about growing older? Do you feel any different after reading this book?
- 8 Bad karma and karmic diseases (p. 71) may seem insurmountable. What is the benefit of the Mystic Law and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in achieving what may first appear to be overwhelming and impossible?
- 9 Review the Ten Worlds (begin on page 113). Are there worlds with which you identify most? Least? How might knowing about the Ten Worlds help you live more consciously each day?
- 10 Ikeda states, “Our karmic energy mutually impacts our loved ones (living and deceased) and indeed all humankind. It even affects animals and plants” (p. 160). Discuss your thoughts about the oneness of all life and the ability of one ordinary person to change the world.
- 11 The lotus flower is full of meaning and symbolism. On page 175, we learn that the lotus flower grows in mud yet offers such beauty, indicating that “beauty can emerge even from things that are not beautiful.” We also learn that the lotus flower “closes at night and opens at dawn, a living metaphor for how our minds can open to a divine and sublime philosophy.” Discuss how the meanings of the lotus flower relate to your life and how it may relate to title of the book.