

# Sermon from the April 2017 issue of “Konkokyo-ho: Ametsuchi”

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## We Can Continue to Serve *Kami* Even After Death

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### Receiving a Blessing of Self-Reform

Konko Church of Nomura is located in a small town in the Nanyo or south Iyo area of the Ehime Prefecture, Japan. I grew up in a family that resided in Matsuyama, the biggest city of the prefecture. I learned the Konko Faith at Konko Church of Matsuyama-Minami, and I was ordained as a Konko minister. 24 years ago, in 1993, I was posted to the Konko Church of Nomura, and I have been serving at the Nomura Church ever since.

Both Matsuyama City and Nomura Town are in the Ehime Prefecture, but their respective regional characteristics are different from one another. Both Konko Church of Matsuyama-Minami and Konko Church of Nomura originate from the Konko Faith Headquarters, but the faith I learned at the Matsuyama-Minami church and the faith demonstrated in the Nomura church were different from one another. Konko Church of Nomura was a minister-less church for a long time, and the members of the Nomura church

directed their respective hearts to *Kami* (our Parent Deity) and did *goyo* (selfless service for *Kami*) in order to maintain their church.

Konko Church of Nomura held their Grand Ceremony for Ikigami Konko Daijin, the Founder of the Konko Faith, on November 15, 1993. I visited the Nomura church to worship the Ceremony, and I went there with the Head Minister of Konko Church of Kawakami, Nomura's "Parent Church." Two days later, I made an official debut as a Konko minister who was supposed to do *goyo* at Konko Church of Nomura as their official minister. It was November 17, 1993.

On that day, a few members of the Nomura church came to join the evening prayer service, knowing that I would be coming. After the prayer service, I made a brief sermon at the Mediation Place. I then talked with the members in the church's worship hall. After a while, one of the members said, "I will go home, Rev. Ono." At Konko Church of Matasuyama-Minami, I learned that a worshipper was supposed to come over to the Mediation Place and ask for Sacred Mediation before going home. I was therefore surprised with the person's words. I said, "Please wait. The Konko Faith is said to be a religion of Sacred Mediation. Through Sacred Mediation, *Kami's* wishes are conveyed to people, *Kami's* children, and people's wishes are relayed to their Parent Deity." Then another elderly lady murmured, "Oh, that's right. I now remember doing such a thing in the past." This was a situation of the Nomura church back in those days.

Two years later, Konko Church of Nomura held the Ikigami Konko Daijin Grand Ceremony at the end of October 1995. On that day, we commemorated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our church during the Ceremony. About one month after this commemorative event, I encountered an incident in our church. Prior to entering the Nomura church as the church's long-awaited Konko minister, I had been informed that Konko Church of Nomura had only two families who regularly paid visits to the church. One day, I offended a person from one of the precious two families with words I uttered at the church's Mediation Place. The person who got angry at my words stopped coming to the Nomura church.

Mr. M, the very person who stopped coming to church, was a little over forty years old at that time. This gentleman often came to the Nomura church during the minister-less period and he regularly exchanged the water in the water-pot offered at the church altar. He offered flowers at the altar, too. The way Mr. M served *Kami*, our Parent Deity, was quite sincere. But his faith in *Kami* also had an aspect that appeared selfish to me, and I was too young back then to restrain my frustrations with it.

After Mr. M and his family stopped coming to our church for worship, I reflected upon myself. I felt compelled to ask, "What on earth did I come over here for? I have a wondrous connection to the Nomura church, which brought me here. I was full of motivation to help people be saved by our Divine Parent in this church. But what I actually have done so far is to kick a pious member and his family out of our church. Yet, I – one who did that – still remain here. Do I deserve to remain in this church?" This thought agonized me. It was the notion of keen self-blame. At one time, I even said to my wife, "We are soon going to pack up our belongings and leave here." At one time, I even went to my Parent Church and spoke to the church's Head Minister, "I'm truly sorry, but I just cannot endure this hardship anymore."

The reason I am still at the Nomura church for the sake of serving our Divine Parent today is because I was allowed to survive the painful agony. Since Mr. M's family stopped coming to church, I had been made to reflect upon myself a whole lot. I was made to question myself: "What is the essence of the faith of Konko Daijin, the Founder of our religion?" "What do the words of Konko Daijin, 'the Konko Faith being an open way' stand for?" Konko Daijin teaches us, "As far as I'm concerned, the only thing that matters is saving people." (GII: Sato Norio, 10-2) "Have an open heart. Be broad-minded about the world. The world is in your own heart." (GIII: Konko Kyoso Gorikai, 9) I asked myself, "When our Founder says this way, what on earth is the Konko Faith?" Until I had trouble with Mr. M, I had naively assumed that I was a devoted worshipper of the Konko Faith. Through this incident with Mr. M and his family, however, I was allowed to realize that I was such a narrow-minded person, and this gave me a chance to receive *Kami's* blessings about reforming myself.

Four and a half years passed since then. On April 26th, 2000, a Konko church in our neighboring town held their (Spring) Grand Ceremony. I was amazed when I saw Mr. M in that church on that day. Since I was able to see Mr. M after a long absence, I simply found it impossible to go home without saying anything to him. I asked Mr. M, "How have you and your family been?" Then Mr. M replied, "Well, I have one thing to report to you, Rev. Ono. To tell you the truth, my mother has cancer and she is currently hospitalized. I will soon go to the hospital to see my mother." I said to him, "That's too bad. Please take good care of your dear mother, then" and I left him on that day. Because Mr. M shared the sad story about his family with me, I fetched Sacred Rice (*Go-shinmai*) and Sacred Sake (*Omiki*) of the Konko Faith Headquarters on the very next day and handed them to Mr. M, saying to him, "Please give these to your mother." Mr. M came worshipping the monthly service at our church in the following month. The gentleman said to me, "I report to you that I would like to practice faith in our Divine Parent with a refreshed resolution and commitment from now." Perfectly corresponding with his own pledge, Mr. M resumed coming to our church on a regular basis.

These four and a half years, during which Mr. M had been away from our church, were indispensable for my life. It may sound a bit odd to you, but I am now glad that Mr. M was offended at my remark from the church's Mediation Place. I am now glad that he stopped coming to our church in protest against me. Mr. M's rebellion against me made me think about a lot of things and to reflect upon my past conduct, and so I now interpret these Mr. M-less years as a blessing from *Kami*. Since then, Mr. M has regarded me as his spiritual mentor, calling me "*sensei*" (Japanese for "mentor"). I am humbled and grateful for the way Mr. M treats me.

### I Want to Serve *Kami*

Mr. M fell sick due to uremia in 1989, and his case was soon diagnosed as chronic renal failure. Since then, dialysis was given to Mr. M as a means of treatment. At first, he took a treatment of hemodialysis. However, it took Mr. M forty to fifty minutes to go from Nomura Town to his hospital in O'osu City by car just for a one-way trip. Mr. M's family worried about him, thinking that it would be a big burden for Mr. M to visit such a distant hospital several times a week. Mr. M's family introduced Mr. M to peritoneal dialysis, which was, at that time, a leading yet unusual way of treatment. They did so so that Mr. M would be able to get a necessary treatment at home. It was good for Mr. M, also because he had only to go to the hospital a few times a month from then on, not several times a week anymore.

At the end of 2006, however, Mr. M could no longer endure peritoneal dialysis after taking this treatment for nearly 18 years. Mr. M resumed taking hemodialysis as another way of treatment for his kidney disease. In the following year of 2007, Mr. M received a kidney from his wife through a transplant surgery. After that, Mr. M was quite healthy for about two years, and he came to our church at five o'clock every morning.

Later on, however, Mr. M started to repeat the process of entering and leaving hospital. He had to go through this process repeatedly, because the wall of his small intestine and that of his colon were both thin, which made peristaltic motions in Mr. M's body unsmooth and inactive. At first, Mr. M ate well and excreted well. At some point, however, Mr. M came to be unable to excrete very well, although he still ate well. He didn't feel well either, and he began to throw up in order to feel better. Later on, Mr. M could not even vomit anymore, and consequently, he was hospitalized. This time, it seemed that Mr. M would stay in the hospital for a long, long time.

Mr. M excreted with the help of medicine. He then emptied his stomach. Mr. M gradually began to take liquid food into his body. His doctor gave Mr. M *sambu-gayu* or rice gruel after judging that the liquid food “stayed well” in Mr. M’s stomach. When the doctor judged that Mr. M resumed excreting well in addition to urinating well, the doctor gave Mr. M *gobu-gayu* or a thicker rice gruel. But Mr. M’s peristaltic motions became dull and he stopped excreting. Mr. M then faced fasting. He wasn’t given any food for a little while, and then given liquid food. Next, he was given thin rice gruel. Next, the doctor gave Mr. M a thicker rice gruel. When Mr. M’s peristaltic motions became dull again, stopping his excreting activities, this process was repeated over and over again.

Right before he was hospitalized, I asked Mr. M to report his health conditions via e-mail for the sake of asking for Sacred Mediation, and I asked him to do so every day. I promised him that I would write down Mr. M’s reports on the church’s prayer book for church members so I could pray to our Divine Parent for him. As soon as he was hospitalized, Mr. M began to give me reports on how he was doing, and he e-mailed me every morning and evening. Mr. M had a strong wish or belief; “I want to receive blessings from our Divine Parent at any cost. I definitely want to become healthy again so I can serve *Kami*, our Parent Deity.” Being supported by his own earnest desire, Mr. M received treatments as sincerely and bravely as possible.

About one year passed. Mr. M’s health conditions were becoming better gradually. Mr. M happily reported to me, “Thank you very much, Reverend Ono. Happily enough, rice gruel recently stays well in my stomach. I guess I can go home and celebrate New Year’s Day with my family in my home. I am so much grateful for it.” As soon as he sent me these messages of tremendous joy, however, Mr. M’s peristaltic motions became dull and he stopped excreting. Now Mr. M had to start all over again. He started with fasting once again. Mr. M had spent a lot of time until he got well. He was so close to regaining his health after a long while, and then, sadly, Mr. M needed to keep himself from foods once again.

This time, Mr. M was obviously stunned at what happened. He gave me an e-mail, saying “Since I stopped excreting again, I must start all over again with the process of fasting. I don’t think I can go home for New Year’s Day.” I sensed that the messages contained Mr. M’s grave sorrow and disappointment, and I was lost for words accordingly. I knew I had to reply Mr. M, but I didn’t know what to write for him. I was as stunned just as Mr. M himself. I knew that words of consolation would not reach Mr. M’s depressed heart. Not knowing what to write, I asked our Divine Parent, praying “How should I reply Mr. M?” All I could eventually write for Mr. M was “You must be in great disappointment right now and I am deeply disappointed as well. But I will never give up. Praying to our Divine Parent for you is all I can do, but let me assure you, I will keep on praying to our Parent Deity for you.”

To my great delight, Mr. M accepted my words positively and he seemed to have put himself together again. I knew it through Mr. M's next messages which said, "Thank you very much, Reverend Ono. I will cheer myself up and do my best once more." Mr. M mended his almost broken heart and became hopeful again.

From the next day on, Mr. M gave me the following words every morning: "Good morning, Reverend Ono! I am happy and thankful that I woke up this morning in high spirits, just as I did yesterday. I am grateful that I was allowed to excrete and urinate and have a good sleep yesterday. I excreted xx times from last night to this morning. This morning, my body temperature is xx degrees Centigrade. My body weight is xx kilograms. Please pray on behalf of me to our Divine Parent that I will take treatments with a vigorous, hopeful heart all through this day." These words were Mr. M's sincere request for Sacred Mediation. I wrote to him every single day, saying "Let us receive our Divine Parent's blessings for today with cheerfulness, courage, perseverance and a happy, joyful heart that puts a big smile on your face. I will convey your wishes to our Divine Parent without fail, Mr. M."

As for evening, Mr. M sent me messages that went, "Thank you very much for having allowed me to receive treatments today. The treatments and rehabs I received today were... Please let me have a good, sound sleep tonight." This mail that came to me every evening was Mr. M's words of gratitude for that entire day. Every time he excreted, Mr. M reported it to me.

One day, Mr. M wrote to me, saying "I have a report, Reverend Ono. I excreted eight times from last night to this morning. Thank you very much." When I read these messages carefully, I was made to see something. Mr. M was saying that he had had excrements eight times on one night. Mr. M could not move fast. He needed much time just to get to the rest room. Even if he sat on a toilet bowl, he wasn't sure if excrements would come out immediately. Excreting just one time probably took him considerable time and effort, and during a single night, Mr. M said that he had excrements eight times. Reading this report, I suspected that Mr. M hardly had time for a good, deep sleep on that night. Yet, Mr. M didn't say that he hardly had had time for sleep. He instead said in his mail, "I was able to excrete eight times last night. Thank you very much." Even in such a harsh circumstance, Mr. M was still thankful. His deep sincerity towards our Parent Deity almost made me feel sorry for him.

### Prudence Required at the Time of Death

Fortunately enough, Mr. M's health conditions improved in July 2010. He was released from the hospital on August 6. Mr. M spent a few days in his home. Around August 10, Mr. M

began to have a cold-like symptom. On August 12, he went to the hospital, only to be diagnosed as having pneumonia. Because of the seriousness of the disease, Mr. M was told to go by ambulance to a hospital in Matsuyama City, which had good facilities. As soon as Mr. M arrived at the hospital in Matsuyama, he was told that he would begin to receive treatments for his pneumonia. Mr. M was equipped with a ventilator and put into an ICU room. Mr. M and his wife exchanged words briefly right before he was taken into the ICU, and the words the lady heard at that time were the last words Mr. M gave her.

The Founder teaches us, "Practice faith and accumulate virtue. Prudence is most important for those who have received virtue from Kami-Sama. Even when you are always prudent, you will lose that virtue if you have a complaining heart at the time of your death." (GI: Yoshimoto Kichihyoe, 1-4)

Human beings are not immortal. We all need to return to our Parent Deity someday. Even if we say "I am thankful for the blessings from our Parent Deity" while we are healthy, we may have pain in the lower back and/or legs as long as we are alive. Over the course of our respective lives, there are many things that do not go in a way we want them to go. Even when we have pain in our bodies and/or have things that just don't go in a way we want them to go, we, Konko believers, are supposed to train ourselves and find something positive and become thankful about it. We, as a result, often say "Thank you, my Divine Parent" in our lives. However, no matter how many times we express our gratitude to our Parent Deity during our lifetimes, we may lose virtue our Parent Deity has kindly bestowed upon us once we have a complaining heart at the time of leaving this world and returning to our Divine Parent. Then our virtue will simply go down the drain and it will be a huge waste of something valuable. We will owe tremendous apology to our Divine Parent for that.

I had an earnest wish for Mr. M, keeping this teaching in my mind. I strongly wanted Mr. M to receive blessings from *Kami* not only during his lifetime but also at the time of his passing away. I had this wish for Mr. M because I knew that Mr. M was practicing faith, saying "Thank you very much" to *Kami*. I therefore did not want him to think, "Why do I have to leave this world now, even though I have practiced faith in our Parent Deity this much throughout my life?" when he was about to leave this world. I knew how sincere Mr. M's the faith was. I knew how pious Mr. M was. Therefore, I strongly and deeply wanted him to receive a blessing from *Kami*, our Divine Parent, at the time of his bidding farewell to this world. I wanted Mr. M to retain his prudence and modesty when he took his last breath. Since then, I began to pray to our Divine Parent about something new. I began to pray that not only Mr. M but also everybody else including myself "will not fail to receive blessings from our Parent Deity at the time of passing away."

Mr. M passed away on the early morning of August 28, 2010. Mr. M's wife gave me a phone call, reporting to me, "Rev. Ono, my husband has just returned to our Parent Deity." Soon after the brief phone conversation, Mr. M's body left the hospital in Matsuyama City, taking the two hour trip to return to his house in Nomura Town. I visited Mr. M's home so I could say good-bye to him. Because Mr. M was not a converted Konko member, I wasn't asked to hold a funeral ceremony for him. In Japan, most homes/families follow Buddhism, which means their family religion is Buddhism. Individually, some people like Mr. M follow another religion such as the Konko Faith during their lifetimes. Mr. M's family kindly told me when they would have a funeral for Mr. M. I handed Sacred Rice (*Go-shinmai*) to Mr. M's family and I then went to the local Konko administrative office, for I had something to do over there.

When I returned home from the administrative office, my daughter told me, "Dad, Mr. M came over to our church today." "Why do you think so?" I asked her. Then my little girl told me the following story: At around 16:30 of that day, she and her mother (my wife) were upstairs. They felt someone's presence in our church's worship hall. My wife went downstairs and there was nobody in the worship hall. She came back upstairs to see her daughter again, who then told her, "I have just heard someone clap his hands." My wife went downstairs again only to see no one in the hall. My wife and daughter finally said in unison, "This probably means that Mr. M visited our church."

September came around and Mr. M's wife took a visit to our church one day so as to thank *Kami* for the blessings her husband had received from *Kami* in his life. I said to the lady, "On the evening of the very day your husband passed away, he seems to have come here." Then Mr. M's wife said, "Oh, really? To tell you the truth, my younger sister..." and she began to tell me a story. Her sister came to see Mr. M on the very day he passed away, and she helped Mr. M's family prepare for his funeral.

The day before Mr. M left this world, his younger sister-in-law was in her home. She suddenly had pain in the neck joint. Hyperpnea occurred shortly after that, and she tried to cry out for her husband working outside in the back yard. But her voice did not come out somehow. She could not move her body either. The lady knew what to do when she suffered from hyperpnea, and she covered her nose and mouth, and the hyperpnea was gradually gone. She felt at ease, returning to her normal health condition. After a little while, however, the same symptom came back to her, and this time, she asked her husband to drive her to a hospital.

On their way to the hospital, Mr. M's sister-in-law sat on the passenger's seat. She reclined her seat and looked out through the car window. She knew she was gasping for air so badly. The lady thought she might die, and she was mentally prepared for her death. As



soon as she was prepared, however, something weird popped in her mind. She didn't know why, but her heart was somehow filled with nothing but gratitude at that critical time. The car reached the hospital and the lady was examined by a doctor, who told her that there was nothing wrong with her health. Her symptoms ceased to exist sometime later.

Later on, both Mr. M's younger sister-in-law and her elder sibling, Mr. M's wife, learned that when the younger lady wondrously felt nothing but gratitude gasping for air in her husband's car, her big sister, as the man's wife, was visiting Mr. M in his hospital. Mr. M's wife happily said to me, "Through my little sister, I was told my husband's feelings." Hearing her say so, I was totally relieved too. I was very happy to learn that Mr. M had received a blessing from *Kami* at the time of his own passing, which successfully kept him from having complaints and dissatisfied feelings about his death. I expressed my heartfelt gratitude to *Kami*, our Parent Deity.

### Not Forgetting A Joyful and Harmonious Heart

Today, we are fortunate enough to live in an era in which medicine is highly developed. And many lives are being saved thanks to it. At the same time, however, we find a lot of elderly people who need someone to look after them. Today's Japan is faced with various problems such as old people needing to take care of even more elderly people. Because of this trend, I really feel that we need to seek *Kami's* blessings on themes such as "how we (should) live our lives" and "how we (should) return to our Parent Deity."

Mr. M had various experiences during his lifetime. At some point, he was at the nadir of his life. He had to undergo painful treatments on his sickness as well. Mr. M, however, did not complain about his severe situations. Instead, he was solely focused upon his earnest desire to "serve *Kami/Deity* and people around him." I'd like to learn a lot from Mr. M's sincere attitude towards our Divine Parent.

Life would be filled with beautiful roses if only good things happened to us during our lifetimes. But it is nothing but fantasy, and we do not find ourselves in fantasy. We are in reality. A lot of things happen to us, and some are good and some are bad. When bad things happen, how can or should we interpret and accept those events?

In "*Oshirase-Goto Oboe-Cho*" or "Record of Revelations" that was written by the Founder of the Konko Faith, there are passages; "Everything that happens is Tenchi No Kami's

doing. This includes major upheavals.” (OC: 17-14-1) “Don’t be surprised, no matter what happens. As long as Nittenshi (the Sun) exists, do not worry.” (OC: 26-3-2) I pray that many of you and I will accept non-positive events with an attitude quoted up above.

The other day, I spoke to Mr. M’s wife, “If you do not mind, I would like to talk about the episode of your husband’s passing in a sermon I’m going to deliver at the Konko Faith Headquarters.” Then the lady kindly replied, “Thank you very much, Rev. Ono. My husband will surely be very happy if he learns that he does something useful even after his death.” Thanks to the positive reaction from Mr. M’s wife, I was totally at ease when I delivered the sermon in the Headquarters.

My sincere wish is that I will keep on having our Divine Parent in my sight and maintain a joyful and harmonious heart even though severe adversities may fall upon me during my lifetime. I will return to our Divine Parent at the time of passing away, expressing my gratitude to every single person and thing that have taken good care of me.

If or when someone asks me, “You often say that it’s so good to practice faith in the Deity of the Konko Religion, but how good is it?” I want to reply, “Thank you for asking me that question. Well, let me tell you this: If you practice faith in the Konko Faith, you will be allowed to die a happy death.” I want to give someone this answer with full confidence. I don’t want to put myself in a situation of “Easier said than done.” This is my spiritual goal. In order to meet this challenge, I believe I need to discipline myself. Through training, I would eventually like to become a person who is capable of accepting any kind of events with a positive, thankful heart. Through training, I want to become a person who is constantly able to retain a joyful, harmonious and grateful heart.

I sincerely pray that each of you and I will receive virtue from *Kami*, learn a lot from the faith of our dear Founder, do selfless service for *Kami* and people around us so that we will all be saved and contribute to realizing *Kami*’s wish to allow both *Kami* and people to be fulfilled.

(THE END)