

**February**  
**Study of Nichiren Daishonin's writings**  
**The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon**

Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The body is the palace of the ninth consciousness, the unchanging reality which reigns over all life's functions. To be "endowed with the Ten Worlds" means that all the Ten Worlds without exception are contained in the one world of Buddhahood. That is why the Gohonzon is called a mandala. Mandala is a Sanskrit word meaning "perfectly endowed" or "cluster of blessings." The Gohonzon is found in faith alone. As the sutra states, "Only with faith can one enter Buddhahood."

*(The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1, p. 213) (Gosho Zenshu, p. 1244)*

**Background**

Nichiren Daishonin wrote "The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon" at Mount Minobu on Aug. 23, 1277, when he was 56. Its recipient, Lady Nichinyo, is thought to have been either the wife of Ikegami Munenaka, the elder of the Ikegami brothers, or the daughter of Lady Matsuno. The evidence for her identity is not clear. Judging from the two extant writings addressed to her—this one and "An Outline of the Zokurui Chapter" written the following year—she appears to have been a middle-aged woman of some culture and position, and rather well versed in Buddhist doctrines.

Almost certainly she was a devout believer, for this letter indicates that she had received a Gohonzon, a privilege granted in those days only to believers of exceptionally strong faith. After the Tatsunokuchi Persecution on Sept. 12, 1271, Nichiren Daishonin began to inscribe the Gohonzon for a few of his most committed followers. In this letter, the Daishonin explains the significance of the Gohonzon and the importance of faith in it.

The Gohonzon is the core of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. In the first part, he mentions that no one before himself has ever inscribed it. So fully was the Daishonin enlightened to the eternal law of life that he was able to embody his enlightenment — the oneness of his life with the Mystic Law — in a concrete material form that could be transmitted to future generations, thus providing the external cause for all other people to manifest their innate Buddha nature.

The Lotus Sutra expresses Shakyamuni's enlightenment to the fundamental law of life symbolically as the magnificent Ceremony in the Air, an event transcending time and space in which Shakyamuni and Taho Buddhas sat side by side in the Treasure Tower, and all Buddhas from throughout the universe as well as countless beings of the nine worlds assembled to hear the Buddha's preaching. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai expressed his enlightenment to the fundamental Law of life as the principle of *ichinen sanzen*, a comprehensive view of life that clarifies the inseparability of the ultimate reality and the phenomenal world. Yet, awe-inspiring as they are, these are merely theoretical expressions of enlightenment.

Nichiren Daishonin was first to express his enlightenment to the law of life in physical form, so that all other people might attain Buddhahood as well. He did not formulate vast new systems of doctrine or theory, but brought what had hitherto been purely theoretical into the realm of actuality. He gave actual form to the fundamental Law for attaining Buddhahood. The Gohonzon, then, is not a symbol, but an actual expression of the eternal

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Subject: Living Buddhism 01/97 v.1 n.1 p.8 LB9701p08

Author:

Keywords: Aspect Daishonin Gohonzon Major Material Nichiren Real Study Writings

Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and of the life of the Buddha who is enlightened to it. When we chant daimoku with faith in the Gohonzon, we manifest the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo within ourselves. This is the attainment of Buddhahood as an ordinary person, in accordance with the principle taught by Nichiren Daishonin that “embracing the Gohonzon is in itself enlightenment.”

This writing is called “The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon” because it contains a description of what is written on the Gohonzon. Down the center of the Gohonzon are inscribed in Chinese characters the words “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nichiren.” This indicates that the Gohonzon embodies the oneness of the Law (Nam-myoho-renge-kyo — the fundamental truth of the universe), and the Person (Nichiren Daishonin). This central inscription represents the entity of the Buddha’s life. On either side of this central inscription are written the names of the Buddhas Shakyamuni and Taho, as well as those of the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and other bodhisattvas, shomon disciples, gods, human beings, demons and others, just as described in the magnificent Ceremony in the Air depicted in the Lotus Sutra. These figures represent the Ten Worlds or all phenomena of the Buddha’s life. The Gohonzon, Nichiren Daishonin explains, is the ultimate meaning of the Lotus Sutra’s statement that “all phenomena reveal the true entity” (*shoho jisso*), embodying both the entity and the phenomena or workings of the Buddha’s life.

### Commentary

**Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The body is the palace of the ninth consciousness, the unchanging reality which reigns over all life’s functions.**

This is a very well-known and important passage. In it, the Daisho-nin dispels the idea that Buddhahood exists anywhere apart from our own lives and the reality we live in. Herein lies the greatness of his Buddhism, which bridges the gap between ultimate truth and the ordinary person.

The Gohonzon, as we have stated, embodies the life of Nichiren Daishonin, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law. However, the fundamental law of life to which Nichiren Daishonin was enlightened also exists within ourselves. Thus there is no essential difference between the Buddha’s life and the life of ordinary people. There is, however, a definite difference in terms of life-condition. The Buddha realizes that his own life is the Mystic Law, while ordinary people, blinded by delusion, do not. As the Buddha of the Latter Day, Nichiren Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon so that we could awaken to the Mystic Law within ourselves and attain the same life-condition as Nichiren Daishonin himself. Because his aim was to awaken us to the fundamental reality of our own lives, he admonishes, “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself.” If we thought of the Gohonzon as some external or supernatural power that we must beseech for help, that would hinder us from discovering the ultimate truth within ourselves. The Daishonin therefore cautions us against this attitude in several works. “On Attaining Buddhahood,” for example, states:

Even though you chant and believe in Myoho-renge-kyo, if you think the Law is

outside yourself, you are practicing not the Mystic Law but some inferior teaching... Therefore, when you chant the Mystic Law and recite the Lotus Sutra, you must summon up deep conviction that Myoho-renge-kyo is your life itself. (MW-1, 3-4)

To give an analogy, no matter how perfect our eyesight, we cannot see our own face. Only when we look into a mirror can we see what we look like. Similarly, being limited in wisdom, we cannot see our own Buddha nature. However, when we face the mirror of the Gohonzon, we can discover the treasure of Buddhahood (the Gohonzon) within.

Herein we find a significant point of difference between the Daishonin's Buddhism and those religious teachings in which people are taught to depend on supernatural powers outside themselves, either begging their aid or seeking to avert their wrath. Historically, this perceived gap between people and their object of worship has not only blinded them to the truth within their own lives, but opened the way for those claiming to be intermediaries of the deity to gain and exercise power over the lives of others. Nichiren Daishonin's teaching denies any essential gap between human beings and the ultimate reality. Instead, it teaches that the supreme potential lies within us, and shows us how to manifest it "within our mortal flesh" by embracing the Gohonzon.

The Gohonzon is the sole, perfect manifestation of the Mystic Law in our environment, placed there by the compassion and wisdom of Nichiren Daishonin. When we fuse our lives with the Gohonzon by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can actually witness the Buddhahood of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo emerging in our own lives, in both their internal and external dimensions. This happens by what Buddhism terms "the interaction of the four powers." The Gohonzon embodies the powers of the Buddha and the Law, which are absolute. Being the entity of the Mystic Law, we, too, possess these powers of the Buddha and the Law within our lives. However, these powers can be activated only by our own powers of faith and practice. By believing in and chanting daimoku to the Gohonzon, we can manifest the same powers in every aspect of our lives.

The fusion of our lives with the Gohonzon can be described as the tapping of the ninth consciousness. The doctrine of the nine consciousnesses represents a Buddhist analysis of the functions of mind. Briefly, the first five consciousnesses correspond to the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The sixth consciousness, mind, integrates the impressions of the five senses into coherent images, so that one can make judgments about the outer world.

The seventh or *mano*-consciousness is the realm of abstract thought. Spanning both conscious and unconscious realms, it also entails attachment to self extending even below the conscious level.

The eighth, *alaya*-consciousness is an unconscious realm where all experiences of the present and past lifetimes — karma — are stored. This consciousness undergoes change from one moment to the next as one continually performs new actions, whether positive or negative. The karmic content of the *alaya*-consciousness affects the perceptions of the first seven consciousnesses, and these perceptions in turn predispose us to our own particular karmic patterns. The *alaya*-consciousness forms the framework of individual existence, and is the subject that undergoes the cycle of birth and death.

Some earlier Buddhist traditions, such as the Consciousness-Only school, regard the

*alaya*-consciousness as the basis of all life's functions. However, the T'ien-t'ai school posited a ninth consciousness, the *amala*-consciousness or "fundamental pure consciousness" lying beneath the *alaya*-consciousness. Untainted by karmic accretions, it is the imperishable, unchanging realm of the universal Buddha nature, endowed with the four virtues of true self, eternity, purity and happiness. In saying, "The body is the palace of the ninth consciousness," Nichiren Daishonin emphasizes that the potential for Buddhahood exists within us. He taught that by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can gain access to this ninth consciousness, the ultimate depth of life. Activated by our daimoku, its light, so to speak, floods upward to illuminate the workings of the other eight consciousnesses, so that the entire interlocking network of causes and effects forming our individual existence comes to be based on enlightenment. By tapping the Buddha nature or the ninth consciousness within, we can fundamentally change our karma for the better and establish an unshakable state of life.

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The Gohonzon is called a *mandala*, a Sanskrit word translated into Chinese by terms meaning *perfectly endowed* or *cluster of blessings*. Here the Daishonin interprets these expressions to mean that the Gohonzon is endowed with all ten worlds. As mentioned above, the various figures inscribed to the right and left of "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo — Nichiren" in the center of the Gohonzon represents the ten worlds of the Buddha's life.

Earlier in this work, the Daishonin states, "Illuminated by the five characters of the Mystic Law, they display the enlightened nature they inherently possess. This is the true object of worship" (MW-1, 212). Mandalas used as objects of worship in other sects, such as Shingon, depict only Buddhas and bodhisattvas, reflecting the incomplete view that one rids himself of the lower states when he attains enlightenment. But the Gohonzon of the Daishonin's Buddhism is endowed with all ten worlds.

The Daishonin taught that each of the ten worlds has all ten within itself, meaning that even the so-called "evil paths" of Hell, Hunger and Animality contain the potential for enlightenment. The ten worlds of the Buddha's life embodied in the Gohonzon are all "illuminated by the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo" and work in an enlightened way to create value and lead others to happiness.

The difference between the Daishonin and us is that, left to our own devices, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo would never be at the center of our lives. A graphic representation of our lives might show the Dragon Kings in the center, indicating Animality, or the demon Kishimojin, indicating Hunger. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo might be somewhere off in a corner, so to speak. But through the practice of gongyo and daimoku, we bring Nam-myoho-renge-kyo back to the center of our lives. Then, all our inherent states of life from Hell to Buddhahood come to be illuminated by the Mystic Law, rather than being shrouded by delusion and out of harmony with one another. Similarly to the

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way in which an ordinary piece of metal becomes magnetized through repeated contact with a magnet, as we continue to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon, our ten worlds align themselves with the ten worlds of the Buddha's life, and begin working in the most positive way to benefit both ourselves and others. In his commentary on "The True Object of Worship," Nichikan, the twenty-sixth high priest of Taiseki-ji, writes, "If only one believes in the Gohonzon and chants the Mystic Law, then the ten worlds of one's own life will become those of the object of worship."

The fusion with the Gohonzon that enables our innate Buddha nature to well forth is possible only through our faith. Thus the Daishonin admonishes, "This Gohonzon is found in faith alone." Provisional sutras often stressed the development of wisdom as the key to attaining Buddhahood. However, in the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha's enlightenment is shown to be so profound that no ordinary wisdom could possibly grasp it. The opening passage of the "Expedient Means," or second chapter, of the Lotus Sutra which we recite every morning and evening during gongyo declares: "The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable. The door to this wisdom is difficult to understand and difficult to enter. Not one of the voice-hearers or *pratyekabuddhas* is able to comprehend it" (LS2, 23). Therefore, the Lotus Sutra stresses faith as the key to attaining enlightenment. Even Shariputra, one of Shakyamuni's most outstanding disciples famed as the "foremost in wisdom" is said to have attained enlightenment only when he took faith in the Buddha's teaching. The "Simile and Parable," or third, chapter states: "Even you, Shariputra, in the case of this sutra were able to gain entrance through faith alone. How much more so, then, the other voice-hearers" (LS3, 73). Thus the Lotus Sutra emphasizes, "Only with faith can one enter Buddhahood."

Nichiren Daishonin also teaches the principle of "gaining wisdom through faith," which means that through faith, one can acquire the Buddha wisdom and attain enlightenment. In "On the Four Stages of Faith and the Five Stages of Practice," he states, "And because our wisdom is inadequate, he [the Buddha] teaches us to substitute faith, making this single word 'faith' the foundation . . . faith is the cause for wisdom" (MW-6, 216).□

### **Additional Commentary**

The Daishonin describes the Gohonzon as "a cluster of blessings," and goes on to state that "The Gohonzon is found in faith alone" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 213). Everything hinges on the strength of one's faith. If one's faith is strong, one's very life will become a cluster of blessings.

People of strong faith, therefore, never reach a deadlock. They can transform all situations into benefit, into happiness.

Naturally, in the course of our lives, we are bound to encounter various problems and suffering. But all these obstacles can be used as an impetus for growth and for elevating our state of life.

In this respect, the most basic principle for those who embrace faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is that everything serves as a source of benefit and happiness. Unhappiness is a stranger to those of strong faith.

The Gohonzon, which the Daishonin bestowed upon us, is the true object of worship that enables us to observe our minds (*kanjin no honzon*). In simpler terms, *kanjin*, to observe the mind, means "to know oneself."

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The Daishonin taught us about the Gohonzon so that we may know ourselves — our true selves — to awaken us to the Buddhahood within our lives and enable us to tap the power of this supreme state of life.

Faith is the key to unlock this power within our lives, to open up and reveal the brilliance of the diamond-like state of Buddhahood. Inherent in each person's life is a store of infinite life force and a spring of unlimited wisdom. Faith allows us to tap that life force and wisdom at will.

President Toda often used to say: "What's inside you comes out. What's not there, won't."

The strong, pure state of Buddhahood and the weak and ugly life-conditions of Hell, Hunger and Animality — they all exist within our lives to become manifest in response to the external causes in our environment.

Since life is eternal across the three existences, our past karma may also assail us in the present as some major problem or suffering. Just as the cause of suffering lies within us, so we possess the power to transform our suffering into happiness. This power emanates from the state of Buddhahood.

As President Toda asserted, ultimately human beings are the product of what lies inside them: No more, no less. Therefore, we must cultivate the great field of our lives and sink down deep roots of happiness. We must unlock the Gohonzon within us and grow into great trees that stand with unshakable composure.

By doing so, we can demonstrate our elevated life-conditions through our exemplary humanism and commendable behavior, as well as the great benefit and good fortune we receive in our daily lives.

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