

**Modern Buddhist Healing:  
Guided Imagery Based On Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism  
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The following article is based on a presentation made before the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies Conference held August 2, 1996, at Chicago's DePaul University under the theme, "Socially Engaged Buddhism and Christianity."

OVER the last two decades, medical science researchers from around the world have intensely studied the effect of prayer, faith and the mind-body connection in the healing process. As a consequence, medical doctors are now using East Asian meditation practices as adjuncts in their clinical practice. Medical schools in the United States and elsewhere are now including Buddhist and Vedic-based techniques like mindfulness meditation, yoga, mind-body relaxation exercises, prayer therapy and guided imagery as part of their curriculum. The position of this paper is that chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is an extraordinarily effective means for healing the body and mind. Of particular importance is the power of this practice in managing disease and pain, especially when combined with the modern-day technique known as guided imagery.

Regarding the nature of Buddhism, Soka Gakkai International President Daisaku Ikeda writes:

Buddhism is, in a sense, a science. Physics takes the physical world as its subject. Sociology looks at social phenomena. Psychology investigates the human psyche. By the same token, Buddhism is a science that takes life in its entirety as its subject. Happiness and suffering are what it investigates.<sup>1</sup>

Not only does Buddhism clearly define the causes of suffering and illness, it also provides a means to change the karma that is at the root of sickness, pain and unhappiness. Nichiren Daishonin states in his writing "On Prolonging Life" that chanting daimoku with a sincere attitude can conquer any illness:

There are two types of illness: minor and serious. Early treatment by a skilled physician can cure even serious illnesses, not to mention minor ones. Karma also may be divided into two categories: mutable and immutable. Sincere repentance will eradicate even immutable karma, to say nothing of karma which is mutable. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 229)

Buddhism reveals that the reality of life is shaped by karmic cause and effect in an unbroken pattern from the infinite past. In relationship to illness and healing, the Chinese Buddhist master Chih-i (T'ien-t'ai), founder of the Tendai School of Buddhism, explained the causes of illness:

There are six causes of illness: (1) disharmony of the four elements [earth, water, wind and fire]; (2) improper eating or drinking; (3) inappropriate practice of seated meditation; (4) attack by demons; (5) the work of devils; and (6) the effects of karma. (MW-2,213)

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## The New Breed of Healers

HARVARD University professor and author Dr. Herbert Benson, of Deaconess Hospital's Mind-Body Institute, has studied the relationship between prayer and healing for the past twenty years. His well-publicized research has identified three major phenomena associated with prayer and healing that he terms the relaxation response, the faith factor and remembered wellness. In his book *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief*, Dr. Benson confirmed the benefit of faith and prayer in eliciting the relaxation response and leading the way to remembered wellness. His study concluded that repetitive prayer, born of faith, is a highly effective supplement to conventional medical treatment. The essence of that clinical study found measurable recuperative benefits were consistently obtained by chronically ill Christians, Jews and Muslims who used repetitive prayer in conjunction with the best medical treatment available. Dr. Benson postulated that personally affirmative mantras or prayers practiced twice daily bring forth healthful bodily changes including lower blood pressure, slower heart rates and lower metabolic rates.

Dr. Benson's findings reveal that all mantras, prayers and secular affirmations appear to be equal in producing the relaxation response. For example, a Jew chanting "Shalom" or a Muslim reciting passages from the Koran was equally beneficial to a Hindu's mantra or a Christian repeating "The Lord is my Shepherd." Even secular affirmations like "I will overcome, no matter what" produced the benefits of the relaxation response.

Another powerful voice in the scientific investigation of prayer and healing is medical doctor and author Larry Dossey, former co-chair of the panel on Mind-Body Interventions for the National Institutes of Health. His research and writing on prayer and self-healing in its varied forms have introduced the public to such Buddhist-like ideas as non-local consciousness, transcending space-time and our ability to initiate recovery through prayer. His book, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, affirmed what millions of people already knew and believed that prayer could heal and make the impossible, possible. His 1996 book, *Prayer Is Good Medicine: How to Reap the Healing Benefits of Prayer*, further explores his premise that prayer has always been medicine's best kept secret.

Medical doctor and best-selling author Deepak Chopra is another leading advocate and philosopher of mind-body healing. Dr. Chopra has put forward such ideas as quantum healing, realizing perfect health, reversing the aging process, balancing the *doshas*<sup>2</sup> of the human body, and the importance of humankind adopting a quantum worldview. His emergence from the constraints of conventional Western medicine spawned an explosion of insight influenced largely by the ancient Hindu-based ayurvedic medicine. Dr. Chopra's observations on life and consciousness as energy fields and that we are integral components of an all-pervasive intelligence governing the universe are important ideas in understanding the elements involved in self-healing. His opinion is that quantum consciousness breaks down matter and being into intelligent fields, waves and subatomic particles. His opinions have very important implications for selfhealing, postulating that every cell in the physical body is a miniature sentient being, knowing every conscious and subconscious thing the person knows, but in its own unique fashion. By way of reprogramming the mind with rhythmical lifestyle changes, meditative techniques and mantras of primordial sounds, a person can redirect errant cells and the body's systems to heal themselves and

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function at an optimum level.

Dr. Martin L. Rossman, one of the great innovators of mind and body healing, discusses the history of guided imagery in his book *Alternative Healing*. In his 1987 book *Healing Yourself: A Step-By-Step Program for Better Health Through Imagery*, Dr. Rossman demonstrates that his therapy has many similarities with Northern Mahayana Buddhist meditation practices that use imagery. With the introduction of the Simonton Method, a simple visualization technique is used that produces excellent results for seriously ill people. Part of the Simonton Method consists of relaxing the body and mind, then picturing immune cells as numerous, powerful and aggressive in the imagined destruction of cancer cells that are conversely visualized as isolated, weak and confused.

### The Influence of Shakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin

SHAKYAMUNI was the first historical Buddha. According to the earliest writings, he appeared in the world to solve the fundamental dilemma posed by the four sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death. Preaching the dharma(s) through a multitude of sutras over a period of fifty years, the Buddha taught according to the capacity of the people, using such expedient means as similes, metaphors and parables to guide people to a correct way of living. In the final eight years of his life, Shakyamuni preached what he declared to be his highest teaching, the Lotus Sutra. Shakyamuni declared in the twenty-third chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the "Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King": "Such is the Lotus Sutra. It can cause living beings to cast off all distress, all sickness and pain. It can unloose all the bonds of birth and death" (*The Lotus Sutra*, ch. 23, p. 286).

In the more than twenty-five hundred years since the death of Shakyamuni, various sects and schools of Buddhism have utilized pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, mantras, mudras, yoga postures, meditative disciplines, breath control practices, and various rituals to produce healing in the body, mind and spirit of believers. But they have never used the essence of the Lotus Sutra. In the tenth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, "Teacher of the Law," Shakyamuni declares: "Medicine King, now I say to you, I have preached various sutras, and among those sutras the Lotus is foremost" (LS10, 164). Because medical professionals have now demonstrated the effectiveness of prayer and meditation by use of pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, it is even more important for them to now investigate and utilize the Buddha's ultimate medicine of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, the king of his teachings.

History has shown that Nichiren Daishonin (1222–81) was an unrivaled Buddhist master. Describing Nichiren, the late British historian Arnold Toynbee wrote:

"Prophet" is an appropriate description of Nichiren; for in many ways Nichiren has more affinity with the prophets of western Asia than with any of the other propagators and interpreters of Buddhism in India and in eastern Asia. Zoroastrian, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish readers of this book will recognize Nichiren's affinity with Zarathustra, Muhammad, and the prophets of Israel and Judah...."<sup>3</sup>

Nichiren gave birth to the widespread chanting of the Lotus Sutra's title and essence. He instructed his contemporary and future followers to chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo and overcome all their obstacles based on faith in the mandala he inscribed,

commonly known as the Gohonzon. In his letter "Reply to Kyo'o," Nichiren writes: "Believe in this mandala with all your heart. Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?" (MW-1, 119)

As evidenced by the many letters to his followers, Nichiren encouraged all people of his time and future generations to chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo so they might become empowered to overcome obstacles, change negative karma, cure illness and attain Buddhahood in the present lifetime. Drawing enlightenment and hope from the mighty ocean of the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren encouraged his followers with the life-sustaining knowledge that by virtue of their faith and determined practice they could overcome any illness and karma, extend their life span, die victorious deaths and be joined by a thousand Buddhas who would guide them safely to nirvana. Nichiren claimed that any illness could be overcome through strong faith. But he also placed great importance on getting proper diagnosis and the best possible medical treatment. Never did he suggest that a person disregard treatment because he or she had faith. In his writing "On Prolonging Life," he strongly encouraged a stubborn, elderly follower to take proper care of herself and overcome her illness: "If you are unwilling to take proper care of yourself, it will be very difficult to cure your illness" (MW-1, 231). Earlier in the same writing he said, "In addition, you can go to Shijo Kingo, who is not only an excellent physician but a votary of the Lotus Sutra" (MW-1, 230). Maintaining a balance between the best medical treatment available and the power of faith is only common sense.

During his exile to Japan's Izu Peninsula, Nichiren was asked to cure the grave illness of the senior government official, Lord Hachiro Zaemon, who was on his death bed. Nichiren agreed to pray for the lord's recovery.

When the steward of this district sent me a request to pray for his recovery from illness, I wondered if I should accept it. But since he showed some degree of faith in me, I decided I would appeal to the Lotus Sutra. If I did, I saw no reason why the ten demon daughters should not join forces to aid me. I therefore addressed the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni, Taho and the other Buddhas of the ten directions, the Sun Goddess, Hachiman and the other deities, both major and minor. I was sure that they would consider my request and respond. Certainly they would never forsake me, but would respond as attentively as a person rubs a sore or scratches an itch. And as it turned out, the steward recovered. (MW-2, 55)

In 1264, Nichiren learned that his mother was critically ill. Returning home, he prayed for her recovery. Again, in "On Prolonging Life," he writes: "When I, Nichiren, prayed for my mother, not only was her illness cured, but her life was prolonged by four years" (MW-1, 230).

Nichiren left a legacy of many personal letters to his followers. He frequently wrote letters that clarified how to overcome illness through the practice of Buddhism. During his lifetime, disease was rampant with deadly plagues killing off much of the populace. In "The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra" (MW-3, 15), he states: "Bodhisattva Nagarjuna in his "Daichido Ron" (Treatise on the Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom) says, '[The Lotus Sutra is] like a great physician who changes poison into medicine.' This quotation occurs in a passage in the "Daichido Ron" that explains the virtues inherent in the word *myo* of the Lotus Sutra. The Great Teacher Miao-lo comments on this as follows: "Because it can cure that which is thought to be incurable, it is called *myo* or mystic"

(MW-3, 15).

Nichiren declared in his writing "Reply to Myoshi-ama": "The person called Buddha is a physician without peer. He has taught us the elixir of immortality, which is the five characters of *Myoho-rence-kyo*. Moreover, he has taught these five characters are beneficial for the illnesses of all the people of the world" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1479).

### The Oneness of Body and Mind

ONE of the most compelling concepts is the principle of the oneness of body and mind. It might also be defined as the essential oneness of the material and spiritual. Modern science has opened new paths in psychosomatic medicine and is rapidly approaching the ancient Buddhist and Vedic wisdom that the mind and body are indivisible. Body and mind or spirit are inseparably linked, exerting reciprocal influence on each other. Further, the body is not the basis for the mind and vice versa. The importance in the oneness of body and mind in our quest for recovery from illness is knowing how to influence the reciprocal nature of our body and mind, like a simple push button means to calibrate a sensitive instrument. Based on the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren revealed this wisdom that enables human beings to overcome any illness as Nammyoho-rence-kyo.

When the mind is disturbed and depressed, there is a corresponding depression in the immune system, just as faith, happiness and encouragement seem to bolster the immune system. Negative feelings, unrequited stress and negative images are harmful to the body. According to Nichiren Daishonin, the true entity of life or the integrating force of the oneness of body and mind is Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. The power of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo to change immutable karma is especially important for children stricken by cancer and debilitating disease, as well as their parents. It offers unlimited hope for the innocent. It has been my experience that Daisaku Ikeda's merciful words are true when he states, "The Buddha is to be found among those who are suffering the most."<sup>4</sup>

Many SGI members in America first learned of what I term mantra-powered guided imagery through studying the following quote from Nichiren Daishonin's "Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings," which makes the point that chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is our body and life itself: "Our head is *myo*, our neck is *ho*, our breast is *ren*, our stomach is *ge*, and our legs are *kyo*. This five-foot body of ours is the five characters of *Myoho-rence-kyo*" (GZ, 716).

Guided imagery is a combination of meditation and imagination. Adults should remember the incredible abilities of children to play in the world of make-believe. Children have the ability to pick up a twig and make it into a toy soldier or create a fort out of sand. There is much to learn and use from the mind of a child when utilizing guided imagery. Imagination, well-structured fantasy or pretend are the same techniques used in conjunction with the meditative discipline to perform guided imagery. In general, guided imagery encourages the person to imagine his or her body producing healing forces from within or, in some cases, attracting healing forces from outside the self, and through the combination of mind and matter, expedite the healing process.

Something of extreme significance regarding chanting is its power to affect loved ones even if they are unable to use it for themselves. One can direct healing powers at

a loved one and in so doing improve the condition of that person while at the same time bringing forth strength and benefit within oneself. SGI members frequently describe their chanting as being able to beneficially influence the life of another person, even thousands of miles away.

Each syllable of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo corresponds to a specific area of the human form. *Nam* does not correspond to a specific part of the anatomy but can be envisioned as originating above the head at the (seventh) level of the *sahasrara chakra*,<sup>5</sup> like a crown of light that emanates to the heavens and cascades down, surrounding the body like a golden robe of holy light. The invocation, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, is repeated out loud. While chanting, a mentally pictured scenario to attack the disease is formulated. Examples of disease-fighting images include imagining your insides bathed in generalized or focused healing light, shooting lasers at tumors, ocean waves and tides cleansing wounds, and so on. Dr. Martin Rossman rightfully suggests using an image that has a strong emotional connection to your life.

The easiest method to begin with is concentrating only on the words and rhythm. Next you find their corresponding place in the body. Visualize *nam* (the body's aura), *myo* (head), *ho* (throat), *ren* (chest), *ge* (abdomen), *kyo* (extremities). When repeating the words, the mind creates a mental picture by placing the sound of each word at the corresponding area of the body. The speed of chanting is optional, but the pace of chanting most used is like that of a galloping horse of about one Nam-myoho-renge-kyo every second or two.

Where there are medical problems in the body, increased emphasis and concentration are given to that word and place. If someone has a diabetic ulcer on their foot, that corresponds to *kyo*. That person might then focus on the area of *kyo*, letting the resonance of that word merge with an image of healing the ulcer. When you feel the image has been productive, you let go of that image and allow healing to occur.

Chanting with faith, frequently and with great passion, is the key to ultimate victory in all cases and especially when confronting chronic illness. Millions of Soka Gakkai International members from around the world have had powerful experiences of overcoming all manner of affliction. However, it is a mistake to believe that every illness will automatically disappear by chanting or using this prescribed imagery, just as no medical treatment is effective in every case. When the body is worn out or disease has spread to irreparably damage other organs, survival may not allow individuals to enjoy the same quality of life that they once enjoyed. Because we all eventually die, it is only reasonable to have confidence in the eternity of life and pray to realize a pain-free, dignified death on our own terms. Management of chronic or intractable illness with chanting is the means to enjoy the remainder of life to the greatest extent with the most beneficial outcome. In spite of our attachment to this current, temporal existence, survival is not always in our best interest. In his best-seller *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, Dr. Dossey offers an intriguing perspective on the true nature of our prayers for recovery, the transient nature of illness, the eternity of life and the transcendental essence of the fundamentally enlightened human spirit:

Even if prayer or attempts at self-transformation fail in the course of illness, there is still a sense in which a cure can always occur. By "cure" I do not mean the physical disappearance of cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, or stroke, but something more marvelous—the realization that physical illness, no matter

how painful or grotesque, is at some level of secondary importance in the total scheme of our existence. This is the awareness that one's authentic, higher self is completely impervious to the ravages of any physical ailment whatsoever. The disease may regress or totally disappear when this awareness dawns, for reasons we may not understand. When this happens it comes as a gift, a blessing, a grace—but again of secondary importance. The real cure is the realization that at the most essential level, we are all “untouchables”—utterly beyond the ravages of disease and death.”<sup>6</sup>

Based on personal experience and ten years of research on the power of healing through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith alone, as well as chanting coupled with guided imagery, I have personally witnessed and become aware of hundreds of cases of recovery, even when death seemed certain. Published reports also have included people overcoming illnesses ranging from cancer and heart disease to diabetes and the host of mental illnesses. Even diseases like AIDS are proving to be mutable karma in the light of faith and improved treatments. In some cases, chanting with faith and hope for recovery with no methods of imagery proved effective. In other cases, chanting with faith was not effective until guided imagery was used. In other cases, chanting with guided imagery where people had no particular faith in it brought about complete recovery. Interestingly enough, recovery from illness based on chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with guided imagery was achieved by people of other religions and by people with no previous religious leanings, including agnostics and atheists. The common denominator of these experiences is that all the people who received proper medical treatment and as an adjunct, chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, were able to make progress against their illness. By chanting, these individuals were able to spark a spiritual revolution within themselves that enabled them to more effectively manage their illness.

### Conclusion

IN recent years there has been a proliferation of healing philosophies that include meditation and practices based on esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism. The reason for people's confusion in finding the best spiritual medicine for their illness is because so many respected physicians and popular authors who advocate self-healing do not yet really understand the essence of Buddhism embodied in the second and sixteenth chapters of the Lotus Sutra. The value of what has been done in merging Eastern philosophy into Western medicine is extraordinarily significant and has resulted in great benefit for sick people.

It is further hoped that the same zeal shown by clinicians and experts in alleviating the suffering of sick people through various meditations and mantras will ultimately lead to the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren Daishonin's invocation and mantra-powered guided imagery. □

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1. Ikeda, Daisaku, “The One Essential Phrase”—Part 2, June 7, 1996, *World Tribune*, p. 9.
2. *doshas*: Ayurvedic cosmology teaches that cycles of life governing human beings are expressed by three major types: *kapha*, *pitta* and *vata*. From the perspective of this

paper, the three *doshas* can be understood as expressions of the unifying quantum Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

3. Ikeda, Daisaku, *The Human Revolution*, Vol. 1, New York: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1972, p. viii.
4. Ikeda, Daisaku, *Living Buddhism*, Vol. 1, No. 2, February 1997, "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra," p. 37.
5. Seven *chakras* or life energy conduits and spiritual energy centers of the human being's subtle body. These seven energy centers derive from Hindu and Tantric Buddhism. The seven major *chakras* are: 1) *muladhara chakra* at the base of the spine; 2) *svadhisthana chakra* at the level of the genitals; 3) *manipura chakra* at the level of the navel; 4) *anahata chakra* at the level of the heart; 5) *visuddha chakra* is centered in the throat 6); *ajna chakra* is between the eyebrows; 7) *sahasrara chakra* is beyond all duality and located at the top of the head.
6. Dossey, Larry, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, pp. 35–36.

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12. Rossman, Martin L., *Healing Yourself: A Step-By-Step Program for Better Health Through Imagery*, New York: Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 1987.
13. Goldman, Daniel and Gurin, Joel, *Mind-Body Medicine, How To Use Your Mind For Better Health*, Yonkers: Consumer Report Books, 1993.

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