

## CHANTING The Engine Of Our Lives

**In this installment of 'Discussions on Youth,' SGI President Ikeda talks about prayer, religion, gongyo and the wonder of the cosmos. Chanting fuses us with the universe, he says.**

**HIDENOBU KIMURA:** Beginning with this installment, we want to talk about faith itself and ask you some questions from our members.

**DAISAKU IKEDA:** Faith is an issue of fundamental importance to us all. You can become a genuine successor of the Soka Gakkai or a great leader for the 21st century only by establishing in your life a firm foundation of strong, unshakable faith. Everything is contained in the single word faith. It encompasses truth, courage, wisdom and good fortune. It includes compassion and humanity as well as peace, culture and happiness.

Faith is eternal hope; it is the secret to limitless self-development. Faith is the most basic principle for growth.

**KAZUE IGETA:** How fortunate we are to possess such a priceless treasure!

**KIMURA:** I agree completely. Yet, oddly enough, in Japan, admitting to having religious faith tends to draw strange looks from many people. If anything, such an admission ought to suggest that a person possesses firm convictions and a solid outlook on life — qualities that I'd say are pretty admirable. What precisely does the word religion mean?

**IKEDA:** The Japanese word for religion (*shukyo*) is composed of two Chinese characters — one meaning basic or root (*shu*), and the other, teaching (*kyo*). In that sense, religion is that which attempts to teach the basics or fundamentals of life and the universe.

**IGETA:** Without being aware of these basics, our lives would be rootless and ungrounded.

**IKEDA:** Religion is proof of our humanity. Of all the animals, only human beings have the capacity for prayer, a most solemn and sublime act.

Nature's colossal and wondrous forces inspired people from ancient times to worship things in their natural environment, such as mountains, fire and the ocean. We can assume, therefore, that a mixture of fear, awe and respect toward the natural world and its phenomena — infinite, vast, majestic and filled with mysteries — led to the human expression of prayer.

For instance, people instinctively wish for protection for themselves and their loved ones when faced with a sudden natural disaster or threat and at the most desperate and dire of times. When such a wish is powerfully concentrated, it becomes a prayer. It is not of the realm of logic or intellect. It transcends such things. Prayer is an act in which we give expression to the pressing and powerful wishes in the depths of our being and yearn for their fulfillment.

**KIMURA:** I think this is something that everyone can relate to.

**IKEDA:** Human beings have an undeniable instinct for prayer. Religion first came into being in response to this. Prayer did not come into existence because of religion; it was the other way around.

There may be many instances when you might feel like praying: in hoping to score well on a test, for example, or to have fine weather the coming day. Even those who consider themselves not to be religious pray for something. Just wishing for the good health of your children or resolving to improve yourself in some way also constitutes a prayer, even if you don't want to call it that.

Prayer in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism — chanting daimoku to the Gohonzon — directly fuses all of our diverse prayers with reality, based on the universal law of life.

In short, religion came into being out of the human desire for happiness.

**IGETA:** This helps us understand the significance of prayer. But there are many different religions in the world. Why?

**IKEDA:** Religion emerged out of the human instinct for prayer, but later in human history, various religions began to define or adopt different objects toward which to focus their prayers.

**KIMURA:** People seem to worship and venerate all sorts of things, depending on their religion.

**IKEDA:** What people take as their object of devotion is a very important issue. In Japan, some people worship foxes [which in folk belief are thought to have spiritual powers]. But by making a fox one's object of devotion, one merely draws forth the state of Animality. This is because our lives commune with and respond to the object of devotion, attaining a state resembling that embodied therein.

**KIMURA:** We also see great divisions within the world's major religions.

**IKEDA:** Yes, that is true. When we trace the various schools and sects of the major religions back to their origins, we arrive at the teachings of such founders as Christ or Muhammad, for example. There are many different kinds of Buddhism, as well. But ultimately they can all be traced back to Shakyamuni Buddha.

**IGETA:** How did teachings from a single founder split into so many different groups?

**IKEDA:** An important reason lies in people's exploitation of these original teachers for their own ends. As the religion developed, priests, scholars and others took advantage of the founder. They used that original teacher as a symbol with which to cloak themselves in authority and enhance their own prestige. Their self-interest became central, not their teacher. This led to splinter groups and sects. This is where all distortion begins.

**IGETA:** Basically, they forgot the spirit of their religion's original teacher or founder.

**IKEDA:** In Christianity, Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, calling for a return to the teachings of Christ. Nichiren Daishonin made a stand, appealing for a return to the teachings of Shakyamuni.

**KIMURA:** Now, the Soka Gakkai is forging ahead, calling for a return to the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin.

**IKEDA:** In any event, Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is as vast and all-encompassing as the universe. It applies not only to this Earth. It is not just for the present. It is a fundamental law that can bring happiness to all life for all time.

Consequently, those of you who have encountered the Mystic Law, this sublime law of life, in your youth are the happiest and most fortunate people in the world. The question is whether you can fully appreciate this fact. The only way you can really awaken to the wonder of this practice is to experience it for yourself. We can understand neither faith nor life through theory or logic alone. Life is not an abstraction. It has to be lived and experienced. It is the history we write through our real-life efforts and struggles.

**KIMURA:** I think the foundation of faith is gongyo and daimoku.

Some people have told me that they do gongyo because their parents tell them to, but they don't really have a clear idea what benefit it has or the purpose for doing it. Others admit that they see no point in doing gongyo when they don't have a particular problem.

The Kanagawa Joint Prefecture young men's high school division chief, Shuji Sasaki, shared with me a comment of a student who had recently joined the Soka Gakkai: "Doing morning and evening gongyo somehow propels me in a positive direction. I'm happy with how my day goes; everything just seems to fall into place the way I hoped."

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Would you explain the meaning and significance of gongyo and daimoku?

**IKEDA:** Gongyo is a daily activity in which we purify and prime our hearts and minds. It is starting the engine for our day. It's like grooming ourselves before we set out for the day.

There are people who have powerful engines and people who have weak engines. The strength of our engine dramatically affects what we accomplish throughout the course of our lives. The difference can be huge.

Diligently applying ourselves in our daily practice of gongyo and daimoku boosts the power of our engine.

**KIMURA:** When we do gongyo and chant daimoku, a strong life force comes welling forth. But why is this so?

**IKEDA:** Gongyo and daimoku represent a ceremony in which our lives commune with the universe. Gongyo is an activity in which, through our faith in the Gohonzon, we vigorously infuse the microcosm of our individual existence with the life force of the macrocosm, of the entire universe. If we do this regularly each morning and evening, our life force — our engine — is strengthened.

**IGETA:** Each of us is a microcosm — a mini-cosmos or universe unto ourselves.

**IKEDA:** Yes, that's what Buddhism teaches. We exist; we have life. In the same way, the universe is a giant living entity. Buddhism teaches that life is the universe and that the universe is life. Each of us is a living entity just like the universe; we are our own little universe.

A number of Buddhist sutras have stressed the oneness of our lives and the universe by using the example of the human body itself. For instance, the roundness of our heads represents the celestial sphere. Our two eyes correspond to the sun and the moon. The opening and closing of our eyes are night and day. The hair on our heads represents the twinkling stars. Our eyebrows are the constellations.

**KIMURA:** That correlation of our bodies to the universe is really interesting. Are there other examples?

**IKEDA:** Our breath is likened to the wind: Soft breathing is like a gentle breeze blowing through a valley. The ragged breath of someone who is furious or agitated might be likened to a gale or typhoon!

As for the joints in our body, it is said that we have a total of 360 — which correspond roughly to the days in a year. Of the major joints, we have 12, corresponding to the months in a year.

**IGETA:** Is there some parallel for the four seasons?

**IKEDA:** The warmth of our stomachs represents spring and summer, while the cool hardness of our backs represents autumn and winter.

Our blood vessels, meanwhile, both large and small, correspond to rivers. A fissure in an embankment that leads to flooding might be likened to a burst blood vessel or a stroke.

Our bones correspond to rocks or minerals. Our skin and flesh are likened to the land. The hair covering our body is like the woods and forests. The list goes on and on to include our internal organs and such. Buddhist writings set forth in great detail that our body is itself a small cosmos.

**KIMURA:** The human brain is also often referred to as a miniature universe of its own because of its infinite potential.

**IKEDA:** That's right. The key lies in how to draw forth that potential.

When we look at the way our body functions, we could say it resembles a giant pharmaceutical factory. Our body produces its own drugs and medicines and has the ability to protect its own health and well-being. It is a truly wondrous microcosm.

The universe is composed of an incalculable number of essential particles: protons,

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electrons, neutrons, photons, as well as atoms composing the chemical elements, such as hydrogen, oxygen and calcium. These same particles and elements compose our bodies.

One scholar was prompted to observe that the human body is made of the same material as the stars, and called human beings “children of the stars.” Our bodies are not only made of the same matter as the universe but are governed by the same basic principles of generation and disintegration and the rhythm of life and death as pervade the cosmos.

All physical laws, such as those of gravity and the conservation of energy, also affect and operate in the microcosm of each living entity.

It takes the Earth 365 days, five hours and 48 minutes to complete one revolution around the sun. There is a rigorous order to everything.

Our body is said to comprise more than 60 trillion individual cells. When they function each day in a well-ordered, systematic fashion, correctly carrying out their respective jobs, we enjoy good health. The complexity and precision of the human body are mind-boggling.

**IGETA:** Yes, even bodily functions, such as perspiration that regulates body temperature when it’s hot, are pretty amazing when you think about them.

**IKEDA:** Great trouble would arise if our planet veered even slightly from its present orbit around the sun. And nothing short of catastrophe would result if the Earth’s axis were to shift even minutely. All life on this planet would be threatened with extinction. Everything hangs in a delicate balance, governed by the strict principle that life and the vast universe are one. The same principle applies to each individual life — to each microcosm.

Science, for its part, is devoted to the investigation of real, yet invisible, natural laws. Such investigation has led to the invention of many machines and devices that apply those laws. An understanding of the principles of water buoyancy, for instance, led to the development of seagoing vessels. Similarly, discovery of the laws of aerodynamics led to the invention of aircraft, and an insight into the workings of radio waves paved the way for the development of radio and television.

These natural laws I have just mentioned, however, are but partial laws. In contrast to science, Buddhism is devoted to the investigation and exploration of the Mystic Law — the great law of life itself that is the essence and source of all other laws and principles in the material and spiritual realms.

The Mystic Law, too, is invisible. Nevertheless, it exists without a doubt. Nichiren Daishonin revealed the object of fundamental respect, the Gohonzon, in the form of a mandala so that we could tap and manifest the power of the Mystic Law in our own lives. That is why the Soka Gakkai’s second president, Josei Toda, put it in the following easy-to-understand way: “I apologize for using such a simplistic analogy, but the Gohonzon can be likened to a happiness-manufacturing machine.”

When we do gongyo and chant daimoku to the Gohonzon, the microcosm of our individual lives harmonizes seamlessly with the macrocosm of the universe.

**KIMURA:** I don’t think I fully appreciated the significance of gongyo until now.

**IKEDA:** Gongyo is a solemn ceremony. When we do gongyo, we open wide the doors of the treasure storehouse within; we mine the dynamic wellspring of life force that lies dormant in the vast inner reaches of our being; we tap an inexhaustible source of wisdom, compassion and courage.

**IGETA:** Why is it that when we do gongyo, the microcosm of our lives communes with the macrocosm of the universe?

**IKEDA:** The universe and our lives are manifestations of the Mystic Law, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. The Gohonzon is also an embodiment of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. Since all are entities of the Mystic Law, they are essentially one and indivisible.

Therefore, when we chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo and focus on the Gohonzon, our lives

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and the universe merge like cogs in a machine meshing together with perfect precision, and we begin to turn in the direction of happiness and fulfillment. Then we can be in rhythm with the universe 365 days of the year — in spring, summer, autumn and winter — manifesting the vigor, wisdom and good fortune with which to surmount any problem or suffering.

When we rev up the powerful, revitalizing engine of Buddhahood, we can break through any impasse and boldly steer a course in the direction of hope and justice.

**IGETA:** One student asked why chanting daimoku and reciting the liturgy of gongyo should bring about benefit even though she doesn't understand the meaning of what she's saying.

**IKEDA:** An infant drinks and benefits from its mother's milk but does so without knowing the milk's composition. The same principle is at work when we chant daimoku and recite the liturgy of gongyo.

Naturally, it's all the better if we come to understand the meaning — but only because it can help strengthen our confidence in the Mystic Law. If such understanding is not accompanied by practice, however, then it is ultimately meaningless.

It is difficult to grasp fully the profound meaning of the Mystic Law through purely theoretical means.

Looking at the animal kingdom, each species has its own unique means of communication or language. We humans cannot understand it, but birds, for example, clearly understand the language of other birds, and dogs, of other dogs.

Similarly, codes, abbreviations and foreign languages might be incomprehensible to those who are unfamiliar with them but are perfectly clear and intelligible to those proficient in them.

**KIMURA:** Yes. I guess even if we were to say the English phrase *thank you* without knowing what it means, an English speaker would still understand its meaning.

**IKEDA:** In the same way, our voices chanting daimoku and reciting the sutra during gongyo are communicated to the Gohonzon and unerringly understood in the realm of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. You might say that when we do gongyo and chant daimoku, we are speaking the language of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

So even if you don't understand the literal meaning of what you are saying, your voices while doing gongyo and chanting daimoku to the Gohonzon reach all Buddhas, bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities throughout time and space — the protective functions within life and the universe. And unseen, the entire universe will be activated in fulfilling your prayers.

**KIMURA:** Some students have said that they have to get up so early to go to school that they simply find it impossible to do gongyo in the morning. Is it OK in such cases to skip gongyo and just chant daimoku instead?

**IKEDA:** Just chanting daimoku in such cases is fine. To borrow the example of a meal, daimoku might be likened to the main course, while gongyo represents the side dishes, such as salad. Though one main dish might make for an adequate meal, we need to eat from other food groups as well if we want to have a nutritionally balanced diet. When we're busy, a purely carbohydrate meal, for example, can be fine and give us the energy we need, but a balanced meal is ideal.

**IGETA:** When you say *gongyo* here, do you mean a full gongyo both morning and evening?

**IKEDA:** Even just reciting the short "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" (A and C) portions of the sutra book is a perfectly respectable gongyo. Of course, it's preferable to do a full morning and evening gongyo. Gongyo is important, but essentially the most vital thing is that you continue to embrace the Gohonzon your whole life and never, ever abandon it. It is totally self-defeating if you practice passionately with faith like fire for a time and then just

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end up discarding your faith later on. Challenging yourself in small increments is fine. It's important that you develop faith like water that flows steadily and unceasingly like a river that gradually grows in size and converges with the vast ocean.

Allow me to point out, though, that the format of morning and evening gongyo — of five prayers and three prayers, respectively — is not specified anywhere in Nichiren Daishonin's writings but is something that was developed gradually over later generations by the Daishonin's successors. Therefore, if you genuinely don't have time to do a complete gongyo of five or three prayers, then a shortened gongyo is fine. Even just chanting some daimoku is quite OK, too.

**IGETA:** Some people feel really guilty when they can't do a full morning or evening gongyo.

**IKEDA:** As long as we have faith in the Gohonzon, we are not going to suffer punishment or negative consequences on such account. So please put your mind at ease. Nichiren Daishonin says that even a single daimoku contains limitless benefit.

**KIMURA:** Then a dozen daimoku must contain incredible benefit!

**IKEDA:** Yes, so you can imagine the immense benefit you will obtain when you earnestly continue to do gongyo and chant daimoku. Basically, you do gongyo and chant daimoku for yourself. Your practice of gongyo and daimoku is not an obligation — it is a right.

The Gohonzon will never demand that you chant to it. An attitude of appreciation in being able to chant to the Gohonzon is the heart of faith. The more you exert yourself in faith — in doing gongyo and chanting daimoku — the more you stand to gain.

The Daishonin also doesn't say anything in the Goshō about the specific amount of daimoku we should chant. It is entirely up to each individual's awareness and sense of responsibility. Faith is a lifelong pursuit, so there's no need to be unnecessarily nervous or anxious about how much or how little daimoku you chant.

**IGETA:** I know there are some people who can't chant or do gongyo unless they set themselves a concrete goal or target. It's fine, then, if they set a target for themselves that matches their situation or circumstances — resolving, for instance, "I'll challenge myself to do a short morning and evening gongyo and 15 minutes of daimoku everyday."

**KIMURA:** Or "I'll do a short gongyo on weekdays and a full morning and evening gongyo on the weekend."

**IKEDA:** As I said, there's no need to become anxious and put unnecessary pressure on yourself. Buddhism exists to free people, not to restrain them. Doing even a little bit every day is important. The food we eat each day turns to energy for our bodies. Our studies, too, become a valuable asset when we make steady efforts on a daily basis. Our life is created from what we do, how we live, every day. For that reason, we should strive to live each day so as to continually improve ourselves. The driving force for this is gongyo.

Simply offering prayers on a handful of occasions throughout the year — like the droves of Japanese who flock to Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples at New Year's to pray to various gods and Buddhas for protection in the coming year — is just empty ritual and ultimately meaningless.

Exerting ourselves in the practice of gongyo each day amounts to what you might call a spiritual workout. It purifies and cleanses our life, gets our motor running and puts us on the right course for the day. It gets our body and our mind working smoothly and puts us in rhythm, in synch, with the universe.

**IGETA:** Yes, it's really important to keep making efforts, however small, each day. The Hokkaido young women's high school division chief, Kiyoko Oyane, said that many of her members find themselves unable to maintain a consistent practice. But all seem to know that when they have problems, they should take them to the Gohonzon and chant about

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them.

**IKEDA:** The spirit to seat oneself before the Gohonzon is in itself very important. Those who have the spirit to continue to challenge themselves in this way are most respectable. You might decide, for example, “I’m going to chant some daimoku, even for just a few minutes,” or “I’m going to chant to the Gohonzon every day.” Buddhism teaches the principle of earthly desires are enlightenment. To explain this very simply, *earthly desires* refers to suffering and to the desires and cravings that cause suffering, while *enlightenment* refers to attaining a vast and expansive state of absolute happiness.

Normally, one would assume that earthly desires and enlightenment are separate and distinct — especially since suffering would seem to be the exact opposite of happiness. But this is not the case in Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, which teaches that only by igniting the firewood of earthly desires can the flame of happiness be attained. As a result, our lives are infused with the light and energy of happiness. It is through chanting daimoku that we burn the firewood of our earthly desires.

**KIMURA:** I guess you could say that earthly desires are transformed into enlightenment by daimoku.

**IKEDA:** When we chant daimoku, all our problems and sufferings are turned into energy for happiness, into fuel for advancement.

**IGETA:** So the greater our problems, the happier we stand to become.

**IKEDA:** That’s right. The wonderful thing about faith in the Daishonin’s Buddhism is its capacity to transform people’s lives from the direst suffering into the greatest possible happiness and turn the most daunting problems into a source of growth and a foundation for human greatness.

Problems come in all shapes and sizes. You may have some personal problem; you may be wondering how to help your parents live long and fulfilling lives; or you may be worried about a friend who is sick or depressed, wishing for that person’s recovery. On a different level, you may be deeply concerned about the issue of world peace and its realization or humankind’s direction into the coming century. These are very noble concerns. With daimoku, you can turn all these worries and concerns into fuel to propel you forward — you can transform them into life force, into greater depth of character and into good fortune.

I hope you will seriously concern yourself with many things, chant abundant daimoku, and strive in your personal growth as you do so. Faith means setting yourself goals, working toward them and striving to realize each one. If we view each goal or challenge as a mountain, faith is a process whereby we grow with each mountain climbed.

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