

**On the Gohonzon: The Four Heavenly Kings  
Bringing Protection to Life  
By TERRY ELLIS, Contributing Editor**

The Treasure Tower, which appears in the 11th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, is awe-inspiring in many ways, including its size. “It was so high,” the sutra reads, “it reached to the heavenly palaces of the Four Heavenly Kings” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 170). These Four Heavenly Kings appear at each corner of the Gohonzon in large, bold characters.

According to the ancient Indian world view, the four continents of the world spread out in four directions from Mount Sumeru, home of the gods. Indra (Jpn Taishaku or Shakra), originally the god of thunder, lived atop Mount Sumeru. The Four Heavenly Kings lived halfway down it and were his generals. Their job was to guard the four continents and the four directions.

In the 26th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the Four Heavenly Kings vow to protect those who uphold the Law. Great Heavenly King Hearer of Many Teachings is located at the top left corner of the Gohonzon, guarding the north. His function is to listen to the Buddhist teachings and protect the place where the Buddha expounds them. Directly across, at top right, appears Great Heavenly King Upholder of the Nation, guarding the east. His function is to protect the world. At the bottom right corner, Great Heavenly King Wide-Eyed guards the west. His function is to discern and punish evil, and encourage the aspiration for enlightenment.

At the bottom left hand corner, Great Heavenly King Increase and Growth guards the south. In the ancient Buddhist world view, Increase and Growth was of particular importance because he guarded the continent of Jambudvīpa. Compared to the other three continents, this one was said to be a place of fewer joys; it was inhabited by people with negative karma. For that reason, though, Buddhism appears there and spreads. Increase and Growth thus relieves people of their sufferings.

The promise of the Gohonzon is that we will bring these protective functions alive when we open the Treasure Tower of our Buddhahood by chanting Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō to it. But this doesn't mean that when we chant, we'll automatically be protected. Nichiren Daishonin even chided the gods during the years of persecution and personal hardship he faced for their failure to protect him. And many times, he asked himself the question foremost on his disciples' minds: If he were the votary of the Lotus Sutra, why didn't he receive protection?

The answer he offers is profound in its simplicity: “The Buddha and Devadatta [who represents the forces of evil] are like a form and its shadow — in lifetime after lifetime, they are never separated.... If there exists a votary of the Lotus Sutra, then the three types of enemies are bound to exist as well” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 170).

He also explains that “in an age that slanders the Law, guardian deities will take their leave and the various heavenly gods will cease to lend their protection” (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 174).

Understanding all this, the Daishonin teaches us that we should be determined to bring alive in our hearts the protective functions of the Law and the Buddha, which encompass those of the Four Heavenly Kings. As indicated by the appearance of the Treasure Tower, our life-condition can expand to a height that had been envisioned only for mythical gods but becomes ours through our devoted practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism.

*Eight in a series*

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