

On the Gohonzon: Great Heavenly King Sun and Great Heavenly King Moon Heaven in Human Life

By Terry Ellis, Contributing Editor

From the dawn of human time, people have looked up at the skies and marveled at a force beyond their control. From Machu Picchu to Stonehenge, from India to Japan, people paid tribute to the sun and the moon as deities in their lives.

On the Gohonzon, Nichiren Daishonin inscribed Great Heavenly King Sun and Great Heavenly King Moon in the second tier of characters, on either side of Indra and Brahma, as protective forces inherent in one's life and in the universe. We can also say that they represent the world of heaven in human life. It's a world closely linked not only to early concepts of religion but to human desire.

"Many animals live on four limbs with their eyes turned toward the ground," President Ikeda explains in the September *Living Buddhism*. "Human beings stood up on their legs and directed their gaze out into the universe. They aspired toward 'heaven.'... In that sense, the shining 'heavens' must have become a kind of ideal."

Buddhism acknowledges the powerful attraction humans have to the world of heaven. The Japanese Sun Goddess, which Nichiren Daishonin's followers surely recognized on the Gohonzon, is just one example of how human societies have linked earthly power and wealth to the heavenly deities. (Japanese emperors were considered descendents of the Sun Goddess.) But Buddhism proposes a different ideal for human life: To achieve a life-condition so centered on the Law that it is not swayed by the environment.

In that sense, it's important to understand that when we pray to the Gohonzon with the confidence that earthly desires equal enlightenment, the results we're looking for aren't limited to the world of heaven. Focusing on desires and the external world, President Ikeda points out has led to the current deadlock in modern civilization: "[People] fail to direct their gaze within. Above all, they avert their eyes from the universal sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death that constitute the fundamental problems of human existence."

It's also important to understand that the world of heaven, as envisioned in Buddhism, goes beyond the satisfaction of instinctual desire for food or shelter or social advancement. It also includes intellectual and spiritual realms of joy. These are referred to as the heavens of form and formlessness. They are the joy a person experiences in seeking and finding beauty or truth.

If we think of Buddhism or the Gohonzon only as an intellectual or spiritual truth we've found, we're probably stuck in the world of idealism. And from there we can easily fall into the lower worlds. In other words, we may continue to see the Gohonzon as an external "heaven." By contrast, Buddhism is a path of continuous practice and growth.

Nichiren Daishonin, borrowing the words of the great Chinese teacher, T'ien'tai, explained that there are three kinds of millionaires: secular, world-renouncing and mind-observing. Secular millionaires who live in the world of Heaven "could be thought of as people of outstanding character, great wealth or tremendous knowledge," President Ikeda explains. "World-renouncing millionaires means millionaires of Buddhism — Buddhas.... Mind-observing millionaires are ordinary people who realize that, just as they are, they can become such Buddhas.

"Our aim is to become 'mind-observing millionaires,'" President Ikeda says, "whose lives shine over the three existences of past, present and future; individuals who observe their own minds and perceive the world of Buddhahood, which is an inexhaustible ocean of good fortune."

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