

Discussions on Youth Prayer Is Electric!

What makes our prayers work? SGI President Ikeda explores this question in this installment of 'Discussions on Youth.'

Part one of a discussion on how our prayers are answered among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division leaders Hidenobu Kimura (young men's leader) and Yoshiko Ueda (young women's leader). Part two will appear in next week's issue.

SGI President Ikeda: Let's continue our discussion. I'll try to answer any and all questions that you, the youth, have.

Hidenobu Kimura: Thank you. Today's theme is how prayers are answered. First of all, can we pray for anything that we want?

Ikeda: You can pray for anything that you believe may contribute to your happiness or to that of others. For instance, you can pray to improve yourself or to become a certain kind of person. Yes, you can basically pray for anything that you wish.

But I wouldn't advise praying for negative things. Praying for something that will harm your progress toward happiness or that of others will only bring about a negative effect in your life. That's because doing so runs counter to the fundamental rhythm of life.

The key to having our prayers answered is to be in this rhythm of the universe.

Yoshiko Ueda: Previously in "Discussions on Youth," we discussed the meaning of doing gongyo and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. After reading those installments, many high school division members started to challenge gongyo and daimoku. We asked some of them what changes they have experienced since they began chanting.

One student said: "In my second semester, I was having problems with my friends. I chanted to the Gohonzon to change myself for the better, and I gradually could express my feelings more openly and honestly. I could see the good points of those friends whom I hadn't been getting along with. I'm so happy with the way things turned out through chanting."

Another student said: "When I chant, it's like I'm a completely different person. I feel as if I can take on any challenge and do anything that I set my mind to. I really like the changes that I see in myself."

"I was being bullied," said another student, "and I knew that I couldn't take it much longer. So I chanted hard to change something in my life. Not long after, I made a new friend whom I get on real well with and can talk to about anything."

The Gohonzon allows us to realize all our prayers.

Kimura: There were other responses, too. Some students expressed doubt that praying to the Gohonzon could really be effective, or that it was really possible for them to become stronger and more confident. Still others said that, though they prayed with all their might — and made sincere efforts — their prayers weren't answered.

Are all our prayers really fulfilled when we pray to the Gohonzon?

Title: Prayer Is Electric

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Author:

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Ikeda: Yes, of course. The Gohonzon enables us to realize all our prayers. Every prayer definitely is answered.

Nichiren Daishonin writes: “Though one might point at the earth and miss it, though one might bind up the sky, though the tides might cease to ebb and flow and the sun rise up from the west, it could never come about that the prayers of the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra [Nam-myoho-renge-kyo] would go unanswered” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 46).

Our prayers are answered with an even greater certainty than the sun rising in the east every morning. This accords with the law of the universe.

The crucial thing, therefore, is whether we are really practitioners of the Lotus Sutra, of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Whether we are really putting the teachings of the Daishonin’s Buddhism into practice.

President Toda used to say: “Obviously, when you strike a bell, you’re going to get a vastly different sound depending on whether you use a toothpick, a chopstick or a bell stick. The bell’s the same, but if you hit it powerfully, it rings loud. If you hit it weakly, it rings soft.

“The same is true of the Gohonzon,” he said. “The benefit that we receive depends entirely on the power of our faith and practice.”

Kimura: That example is very clear.

Belief is a kind of force that makes our prayers work.

Ikeda: As the expressions *the power of faith* and *the power of practice* indicate, belief is a kind of force or strength. The greater your conviction that your prayers will be answered — the stronger your faith — the more powerfully the Gohonzon, the Mystic Law, responds to your prayers.

The power of practice encompasses the strength of your chanting and the energy with which you work for kosen-rufu — for the happiness of all people and the prosperity of society. The stronger the power of your practice for yourself and others, the more you can tap the power of the Buddha and the power of the Law of the Gohonzon.

Although we say that prayers are answered, in the Daishonin’s Buddhism the fulfillment of our prayers is not magical or occult. It’s not about some mysterious, enlightened being or god in a distant realm taking pity on us to grant our wishes.

Just as there are physical laws like those governing electricity — laws that human beings in their ingenuity have learned to harness and put to practical use — Buddhism has delved into and uncovered the law of life and the universe. Just as electric light was invented based on the laws of electricity, the Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon based on the supreme Law of Buddhism.

Mr. Toda used to describe the Gohonzon this way: “This certainly doesn’t do it full justice, but the Gohonzon can be likened to a happiness-manufacturing machine.” The Gohonzon is the ultimate manifestation of human wisdom and Buddha wisdom. That’s why the power of the Buddha and the Law are only as strong as the power of your faith and practice.

If the power of your faith and practice equal a force of a hundred, then they will bring forth the power of the Buddha and the Law in equal strength. And if it is a force of 10,000, then it will elicit that corresponding force.

Kimura: So just as we can enjoy the illumination of an electric light without fully

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understanding the laws of electricity, by turning on the switch of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we tap the power of the Mystic Law and fulfill our prayers — without having to master the vast body of Buddhist doctrine, often described as a treasury of 80,000 teachings.

Ikeda: Of course, it is beneficial to study Buddhist doctrine. The more we study it, the more it reinforces our understanding and deepens our appreciation of the excellence and profundity of Buddhism — which in turn serves to strengthen our faith and conviction. The fundamental purpose of Buddhist study is to fortify the power of our faith and practice.

Religion came from prayer — not the other way around.

Ueda: We tend to think of prayer as some special, out-of-the-ordinary thing. But in fact, it is a normal, everyday thing, isn't it? It's the fruit of human wisdom, actually.

Ikeda: As far as we know, only human beings pray. And we have done so from ancient times. We have prayed to the sun, to fire, to the mountains. Our species has long pressed its hands together in prayer to Nature, asking it for safety and happiness.

Prayer is an expression of our reverence for the universe, our awe toward forces greater than ourselves. Prayer transcends the logical, the rational, the scientific. It comes from an intuitive recognition of the link, the relation, the correspondence between the individual and the universe.

Pressing one's hands together in prayer is one of the most noble human acts.

Prayer is instinctual to human beings. When we're in trouble, for instance, we instinctively wish to be helped or protected.

Kimura: Yes, I'm sure that we've all experienced that when we were in dire straits. It's not something that we can explain logically; it's just part of being human.

Ikeda: I think that this instinct naturally evolved to take the form of prayer. People have no doubt experienced this the world over, in every culture since time immemorial.

They felt this way even though they did not possess any theories or detailed, logical explanations to support their feelings. They probably weren't convinced that their prayers would always be answered, either.

But it is believed that religion gradually emerged from this prayer.

Ueda: So prayer didn't develop from religion — religion developed from prayer!

Ikeda: All people, even those who say that they have no religion, have deeply cherished wishes and aspirations. We all pray for something in the depths of our hearts.

Prayer in the Daishonin's Buddhism is a means, based on the Law of the universe, for closing the gap between those wishes and reality.

Kimura: There are so many religions and so many different objects of worship....

Ikeda: In Japanese, an object of religious worship is called *honzon*, literally meaning an object of fundamental respect. There are all kinds of objects of devotion. In some religions, animals such as horses or snakes serve that function. However, the Daishonin says, "All of these schools are misled concerning the true object of worship" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 131).

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Ueda: Could you explain the significance of the object of fundamental respect in the Daishonin's Buddhism?

Ikeda: The *hon* of *honzon* connotes the true basis of life and the universe. And *zon* connotes veneration and reverence for that.

If you embrace something that is not the true basis of the universe as an object of fundamental respect, everything will be distorted, off track. For instance, there are people who regard money, the mass media, science and technology or high academic status as the objects of supreme respect.

Kimura: Yes. And I know that there are some people who center their lives around their parents — or their girlfriend or boyfriend.

The proper way to pray? Just be yourself.

Ikeda: In the Daishonin's Buddhism, the fundamental Law of the universe is venerated as the object of fundamental respect. This Law is also the essence of our lives.

This might be a little difficult to understand, but when we pray to the object of fundamental respect, the Gohonzon, the Buddhist principle of the fusion of reality and wisdom is at work. The objective reality of the Gohonzon and the wisdom of our minds are fused at the deepest level.

Prayer, in other words, constitutes a fusion of the ultimate Law of the universe and our minds.

You can think of this as the gears of a machine meshing. When a small gear locks its cogs with those of a large gear, it can display a tremendous force — that it otherwise wouldn't have. In the same way, when we synchronize the microcosm of our lives with the macrocosm of universal life, we can tap unlimited power to overcome any problem.

All Buddhist gods, Buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout the 10 directions — all the protective forces of the universe — will be activated, so that we can realize our prayers.

Ueda: Prayer allows those gears to mesh, then?

Ikeda: That's right. Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is the sound of the great rhythm of the universe. It is the power source of all universal activity. It is also the heart and essence of the universe.

The Mystic Law is the source of all change. That's why when we chant the Mystic Law, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, we activate the universal forces to support us. The rhythm of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo has been called the rhythm of the universe's movement.

The power of chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo to activate the universe's protective functions appeared in a movie a while ago, I believe.

Kimura: Yes, it was *Inner Space*, a story about traveling inside the microcosm of the human body. At one point, the protagonist chants Nam-myoho-enge-kyo to break through a crisis.

Ueda: One student writes saying that she doesn't know how to pray and asks about the proper way.

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Ikeda: Basically, just be yourself. That's the most important thing.

Revere the Gohonzon as the fundamental basis of your life, reach out to it and take your problems to it — do this naturally, as a child reaches for its mother. When you're suffering or when you're sad, there's no need to put on a good face or pretend that everything's all right. Just chant exactly as you are, unreservedly giving expression to the feelings in your heart.

The Daishonin writes, "What we call faith is nothing extraordinary" (MW-5, 303). And he urges, "As parents will not abandon their children, or as a child refuses to leave his mother, so we should put our trust in the Lotus Sutra" (MW-5, 303). In other words, all that we need do is trust the Gohonzon wholeheartedly, praying sincerely that our desires will be realized. Such prayer definitely will empower us.

There is nothing extraordinary about prayer — prayer is simply wishing for something with all our heart.

And our heart matters most. It is important to chant with deep faith, reverence and love for the Gohonzon in our heart.

When it comes to chanting, both quantity and quality count.

Kimura: One student asks whether he has to chant for a certain number of hours before his prayer will be answered. Or can he chant intensely for a short time? In other words, which is more important, quantity or quality?

Ikeda: The value — or, if you like, quality — of a \$100 bill is more than a \$10 bill. Naturally, most people would prefer a \$100 bill, right? Similarly, in faith, sincere, strong prayers are important.

Of course, having lots of \$100 bills is even better! Likewise, in prayer, both quantity and quality count.

We practice Buddhism to become happy. The main thing is that each of us feels deep satisfaction after chanting. There are no hard-and-fast rules about having to chant a certain number of hours.

Setting chanting targets can be helpful, but when you're tired or sleepy and are just mumbling along in a half-conscious daze, it's better to stop and go to bed. After you've rested, you can chant with concentration and energy again. This is much more valuable. We should be alert and earnest when we pray, not nodding off.

As I said, most important is that our chanting be satisfying and refreshing to us, so that we can exclaim when we've finished, "Ah, that felt good!" By reinforcing that feeling day after day, our lives naturally move in the most positive direction.

Ueda: I have heard countless experiences from our members of the power of chanting.

Ikeda: Yes, and the SGI is strong precisely because our members have such personal experiences.

To be continued