

ON THE FORMALITY OF GONGYO

The following is excerpted from Selected Speeches—On the Basics of Buddhism, pp. 34–45: SGI President Ikeda’s speech at a Kansai general meeting, held at the Soka University auditorium in Hachioji, Tokyo, May 4, 1993.

Faith is a lifelong pursuit. It is also an eternal one, continuing over the three existences of past, present and future. Kosen-rufu, too, is a long, long journey.

How, then, on this journey toward happiness, can we stay the course to the end? How can we live so as to make each day of our precious lives valuable and exhilarating?

Doing so requires profound wisdom. For example, there are times when we suffer from exhaustion or feel under the weather. This is only natural since we are creatures of flesh and blood. At such times, what should we do about gongyo? What should our attitude be toward chanting daimoku? Today, in response to the members’ day-to-day concerns, I shall address these points in light of Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings. Such concrete guidance based on the Daishonin’s writings is important.

Essentially, the Daishonin says that, depending on the situation, it is all right to just chant daimoku, and that we need not necessarily sit before the Gohonzon to do so.

This is how the Daishonin responded to a question from the wife of a follower, Hiki Daigaku Saburo Yoshimoto. The wife had asked whether she should refrain from carrying out her daily Buddhist practice during her menstrual period. Since ancient times, it had been a common belief in Japan that menstruation represented a kind of pollution. It appears that the woman who put this question to the Daishonin was worried about whether it was acceptable to read and recite Buddhist scriptures at such a time.

In response, the Daishonin emphasizes that there is no cause for avoidances in connection with menstruation, and that, rather, menstruation has an important biological function. For the time in which he lived, such a view was remarkably enlightened.

“Or in another sense,” he says, “it [menstruation] might be regarded as a kind of chronically recurring illness” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 6, p. 12), and goes on to explain the type of practice that would be best suited for such times.

At present, the question of “pollution” or “impurity” in connection with menstruation is no longer an issue. Indeed, in a broader sense, we can interpret the Daishonin’s words as providing a clear direction on what we should do about reciting the sutra, that is, gongyo, when ill or feeling poorly. In other words, the Daishonin here indicates the principle that gongyo is a practice that should be carried out with flexibility in accordance with various circumstances.

In a preceding passage of this writing, the Daishonin says: “This is a matter that concerns all women and about which they always inquire. In past times, too, we find many persons addressing themselves to this question concerning women. But because the sacred teachings put forward by the Buddha in the course of his lifetime do not touch upon this point, no one has been able to offer any clear scriptural proof upon which to base an answer” (MW-6, 11).

The Daishonin says that all who have commented on the matter, being unable to produce documentary proof based on the Buddhist scriptures, merely speak arbitrarily. By contrast, the Daishonin always made the scriptures his foundation. That is why we, too,

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always advance basing ourselves on the Gosho, the scripture of the Latter Day of the Law.

Similarly, regarding the custom of doing five prayers during morning gongyo and three prayers during evening gongyo, nowhere in the Gosho is such a practice set forth. It is a form that came about at a later time.

Moreover, originally, this form of gongyo was part of the practice for priests. It would appear, however, that today it is priests who are failing to adhere to this form. That lay people, with their busy schedules, should be following such a regimen of daily practice is truly remarkable.

Many members, out of their earnestness and sincere faith, strive to carry out a perfect practice of five prayers in the morning and three prayers in the evening, even when tired or feeling ill, or even if it means staying up late at night. Such faith is infinitely praiseworthy. The efforts of those who maintain such a practice are definitely known to the Gohonzon.

However, and this is especially true in the case of the elderly, unreasonably pushing yourselves may seriously undermine your health. There may be times when, depending on your physical condition, [instead of doing a complete gongyo] it is more valuable to just chant daimoku for a little while, or even just chant three daimoku, and then get some rest. This is something we must determine for ourselves.

Faith is something we endeavor to pursue throughout our entire lives. Even though there may be times when we cannot carry out our practice of gongyo perfectly, so long as we believe in the Gohonzon and maintain a seeking mind of faith, our good fortune will not disappear.

There is a difference between strong faith and taxing ourselves unreasonably. What counts is having the life force to live each day vigorously and burning with hope. Therefore, under certain circumstances it may be better to go to bed early and get a good night's sleep so that in the morning you can do gongyo with a refreshed feeling.

In the course of our lives as common mortals, gongyo, along with daimoku, represents a most solemn encounter with the original Buddha. It is a ceremony that brings forth our state of Buddhahood and allows us to reveal the Gohonzon in the depths of our lives. For this reason, our practice should be invigorating and filled with joy. Gongyo should leave us feeling refreshed and revitalized.

It may be that your gongyo has lapsed into mere formality, your eyes constantly on the clock. And the more you think about the time, the more slowly it seems to go by. Or it could be that you're so exhausted you can't concentrate on your gongyo, constantly losing your place when reciting the long section of the "Juryo" chapter—inadvertently jumping ahead, returning to an earlier point, and just basically going in circles. Or maybe your daimoku is really garbled and indistinct because you're half asleep.

While you are certainly to be commended that despite all this you still make the effort to do gongyo, I think it is important to use your wisdom and practice in a way that accords with the principle "faith manifests itself in daily life."

In this sense, I think it is best, if possible, to make a point of doing evening gongyo fairly early, before it gets too late.

In conclusion, Nichiren Daishonin states: "If you feel so inclined, then dispense with the reading of the sutra and simply recite Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Also, when making your devotions, you need not bow facing the sutra [the Gohonzon]" (MW-6, 13).

It is perfectly acceptable just to chant daimoku without reciting the sutra. Moreover, the

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Daishonin says that we need not necessarily do gongyo or chant daimoku in front of the Gohonzon. Here, the Daishonin also takes into account the case where a person [incapacitated by illness or other reasons] might do gongyo or chant daimoku lying down. In this way, he always showed great flexibility toward the formal aspects of practice. He always taught that “faith alone is what really matters” (MW-1, 246).

Of course, we must not take this as license to be negligent and lazy in our practice. It goes without saying that we must always diligently strive to carry out the basic practice of doing gongyo and chanting daimoku. If you purposely use the Goshō to justify neglecting your Buddhist practice, it will only result in your own loss. It is not for anyone else, but for our own happiness that we practice faith.

The Daishonin’s statement that it is all right simply to chant daimoku is based on the premise of the great benefit of Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō.

At the beginning of this same writing, he says: “In the case of the Lotus Sutra, one may recite the entire sutra of twenty-eight chapters in eight volumes every day; or one may recite only one volume, or one chapter, or one verse, or one phrase, or one word; or one may simply chant the daimoku, Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō, only once a day...” (MW-6, 3).

In other words, he says there are many possible ways of reciting the Lotus Sutra. He then continues: “Or [one may] chant it only once in the course of a lifetime; or hear someone else chant it only once in a lifetime and rejoice in the hearing; or rejoice in hearing the voice of someone else rejoice in the hearing...” (Ibid.).

The sound of daimoku can even cause others to respond with joy when they hear it. Therefore, let us always strive to chant such invigorating and refreshing daimoku that draws forth this response in others.

Through hearing our voices chanting the Mystic Law, hearing the confidence that resonates therein, it is possible to inspire joy in others and make a strong impression upon them of how wonderful and energetic the SGI members are, and of how coming in contact with them always leaves us feeling happy and refreshed. Others, again, may simply rejoice when encountering the happy, glowing faces and the beautiful smiles of our members.

In this respect, our outward appearance is important. This accords with the principle that all phenomena manifest the true aspect of life (*shoho jisso*). Indeed, such a joyous response is truly evident among friends of the SGI. One person after another responding with joy in a chain reaction—this principle lies at the root of our movement to introduce others to the SGI.

The Daishonin continues: “And so [this chain of rejoicing continues] on to fifty removes from the original individual who first chanted the daimoku.”

“In such a case, of course, the spirit of faith would become weak and the feeling of rejoicing much diluted, like the vague notions that might occur to the mind of a child of two or three, or like the mentality of a cow or a horse, unable to distinguish before from after. And yet the blessings gained by such a person are a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand times greater than those gained by persons of excellent innate ability and superior wisdom who study other sutras: persons such as Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Monju and Miroku, who had committed to memory the entire texts of the various sutras.”

“The Lotus Sutra itself tells us this, and the same opinion is expressed in the sixty volumes of commentary by T’ien-t’ai and Miao-lo” (MW-6, 3-4).

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So great is the benefit of chanting daimoku. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo even once produces tremendous benefit, eternal benefit. This is the essence of our faith. We should have great confidence in this point.

Basing his remarks on a passage of the Lotus Sutra, the Daishonin states: “And yet we read that the blessings acquired by one who recites no more than a single word of the Lotus Sutra are the one thing alone [the Buddha wisdom] cannot fathom. How, then, could ordinary persons like ourselves, who have committed so many grave offenses, be capable of understanding such blessings?” (MW-6, 4).

This is the great benefit of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo even once. A single arrow, shot by a great archer, will unerringly hit the mark. Similarly, a strong and deep prayer offered with unwavering *ichinen*, or concentration of mind, will, in accordance with the principle that a single life-moment contains three thousand realms (*ichinen sanzen*), move the entire universe.

Since such is the benefit of chanting a single daimoku some of you might feel puffed up with pride because you managed to chant at least three daimoku today! Of course, it is important to feel such joy from practice. And it doesn't say anywhere in the Gosho how many daimoku or how many hours a day a person should chant.

It goes without saying, of course, that if you chant a lot of daimoku, it is all to the good. However, ultimately each of us must decide for ourselves the amount of daimoku we chant based on our awareness and determination. The amount of daimoku we chant is certainly not a matter of obligation or formality.

For instance, from time to time I hear of people chanting eight or ten hours in a single day. I bow my head to the intensity and earnestness of faith of these members. If, however, they neglect their responsibilities and commitments and just chant away, they cannot be said to be practicing in accord with the principle, “faith manifests itself in daily life.” You must not allow your daily life to fall by the wayside or cause others, including members of your family, suffering and inconvenience because of your chanting many hours of daimoku. Nor should you go around boasting of the long hours of daimoku you have chanted in a day.

Carrying on in such a way can easily give rise to various misunderstandings among those around you. A person who has such an attitude may be viewed by neighbors as something of a fanatic. The result may be that the person loses others' trust and degrades the Law.

The same is true within the organization. There are instances where an organizational unit formally conducts a “ten-hour daimoku campaign” or the like. While there is nothing wrong with an activity of this kind if it is voluntarily undertaken by two or three willing people, difficulties arise when an attempt is made to impose such a rigid regimen equally on many people. For people have different daily schedules, they have different amounts of time available to them, they have different physical stamina and so on.

Consequently, it is possible that holding such an activity might impose unreasonable demands on any number of people. It is always necessary to exercise careful consideration. Moreover, we must never attempt to make participation in such activities compulsory. You must not goad people into attending activities by making extreme statements, such as saying, “If you fail to attend, you will not be following the way of the SGI.”

It is important that people derive joy, peace of mind and hope from their practice of faith. We must strictly refrain from giving guidance that oppresses people or causes them

suffering. In giving guidance, leaders should always take into account the circumstances and conditions of their members.

Thus, I hope that leaders will give clear direction that, while based on firm recognition of the great benefit of chanting daimoku, also demonstrates wisdom and common sense so that all may joyously advance in accord with the principle of “faith equals daily life.” If a leader wishes to launch a major daimoku campaign and get a rhythm of more chanting going, the important thing is that that person lead by offering deep and strong prayers.
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