

STUDY MATERIAL FOR FEBRUARY
“THE MEANING OF FAITH”
(THE WRITINGS OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN, P. 1036)

For the past two years, our bimonthly study material has been taken from SGI President Ikeda’s book Learning from the Gosho: The Eternal Writings of Nichiren Daishonin. This month, we return to our previous format of presenting a writing or excerpt from Nichiren Daishonin accompanied by an explanation prepared by the SGI-USA study department. This month’s Gosho, “The Meaning of Faith,” is intended as the SGI-USA February Gosho study material. Following it is an article written in 1956 by the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, titled “Faith.” We felt it related well to the message of “The Meaning of Faith.”

BACKGROUND

This letter was written at Minobu in the fifth month of the third year of Koan (1280). The lay nun Myoichi was a relative of Nissho, one of Nichiren Daishonin’s six senior disciples, and lived in Kamakura. She was an earnest believer and fairly well educated, but suffered from poor health. Her husband was also a believer, and their estate was confiscated because of their faith. After her husband died, the lay nun was left with two small children, but despite her many difficulties, she remained loyal to the Daishonin.

What is called faith is nothing unusual. Faith means putting one’s trust in the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions, and the heavenly gods and benevolent deities, and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as a woman cherishes her husband, as a man lays down his life for his wife, as parents refuse to abandon their children, or as a child refuses to leave its mother.

Not only that, but one should ponder the sutra passages “Honestly discarding expedient means”¹ and “Not accepting a single verse of the other sutras”² without the slightest thought of casting them away, as a woman refuses to part with her mirror, or as a man wears his sword.

Respectfully,
Nichiren
The eighteenth day of the fifth month
Reply to the lay nun Myoichi

COMMENTARY

What is called faith is nothing unusual. Faith means putting one’s trust in the Lotus Sutra, . . . as a child refuses to leave its mother.”

After her husband’s death, Myoichi struggled to raise her sickly children despite her own poor health. It is difficult to imagine today how much hardship an infirm widow had to endure in feudal thirteenth-century Japan. With the social structure, norms and physical demands of that society, most women had to rely on their fathers, husbands or adult sons for their sustenance and survival. But Myoichi was alone. Moreover, since the family’s

estate had been confiscated by the government because of their faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, her life was unusually difficult.

In a letter dated 1275, the Daishonin refers to Myoichi's circumstances, saying: "Your late husband had an ailing son and a daughter. I cannot help thinking that he may have grieved that, if he were to abandon them and leave this world, his aged wife, as feeble as a withered tree, would be left alone, and would probably feel very sorry for these children" (WND, 535-36). The title of the letter we are studying this month, "The Meaning of Faith," was the name given to it in later years. In it, the Daishonin encourages his disciple, of whose hardships he is keenly aware, to continue developing her faith in the Gohonzon. Though short, the letter explains the meaning of faith with simple, concrete analogies. The Daishonin's purpose in making these comparisons appears to have been to encourage Myoichi in her Buddhist practice and to spark in her the faith she would need to challenge her circumstances.

First, the Daishonin explains that faith is nothing special—nothing beyond our ordinary experience. Buddhist faith is very much like the love between husband and wife, or parent and child. As a wife cherishes her husband and a husband would risk his life to save his wife; or as parents selflessly care for their child's welfare and children refuse to leave their mothers' sides, we should believe in the Gohonzon and continue chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, the Daishonin explains. Faith, in other words, is a natural expression of our humanity. Here the Daishonin points out that what we call faith is our sincere desire to embrace the Gohonzon and continue our Buddhist practice.

Put simply, faith means the heart or will to cherish something. In our case, we cherish the Gohonzon as an embodiment of the supremely noble state of life called Buddhahood existing within the lives of all people. We are all capable of cherishing something that we find dear. That such a feeling is perfectly natural and nothing out of the ordinary is the point the Daishonin makes here so poetically.

Often when they talk about faith, people tend to portray it as something special or unusual. Some view it as a transcendent religious state of some sort. But here the Daishonin overturns this perception. While some religious teachers shroud the meaning of faith in the veil of mysticism and place it beyond our grasp, the Daishonin expresses its meaning in terms of our everyday reality.

Most, if not all, of us want to lead happy and fulfilled lives and die peacefully. Faith and prayer are born out of this fundamental human desire for peace and happiness. The Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon in response to, and in order to fulfill, this natural desire. Our prayer to the Gohonzon should therefore be as natural as our wish for peace and happiness in our lives. We don't have to pray as if we are someone or something we are not. Just as children share their dreams and worries with their parents or friends, we can express whatever is dear to our hearts in our prayer to the Gohonzon. As we continue to pray to the Gohonzon naturally and honestly through both good times and bad, we will solidify the condition of Buddha as the foundation of our lives. Herein lies the meaning and purpose of our faith.

In this letter, the Daishonin describes our faith in the Gohonzon as "putting one's trust in the Lotus Sutra . . . and chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo." Here "the Lotus Sutra" indicates the Mystic Law implicit in the sutra. In other words, the Daishonin refers to the Gohonzon of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, the pure manifestation of the Law of life and the cosmos. He then lists Buddhas, bodhisattvas and heavenly deities as the representations of beneficial workings of the Mystic Law permeating all life, including our own.

When we cherish and embrace the Gohonzon, we will naturally tap the immeasurable benefit of the Gohonzon from within our own lives. In this regard, SGI President Ikeda remarked: “What is important is to have faith such that we say, ‘I love the Gohonzon!’ ‘I love doing gongyo!’ and ‘I love doing Gakkai activities!’ If you develop such faith, living in and of itself becomes enjoyable, and you’ll come to love your life” (October 1999, *Daibyakurenge*, p. 55).

Gongyo and daimoku help us establish the Gohonzon as a foundation of our lives. They are Buddhist practices that enable us to tap the infinite power within us that is one with the power of the Gohonzon. The more we practice, the more of this result we experience. Because of this, we grow to cherish the Gohonzon and our Buddhist practice. As we enjoy our practice and our faith deepens, we naturally develop a desire to communicate the greatness of the Gohonzon to others. The spread of Buddhism in this sense is a direct result of our joy in faith. It is faith as the Daishonin describes it in this letter that allows us to feel true joy in our lives, and this is the source of the spread of Buddhism. After all, the Daishonin explains that enjoying and loving what we do as Buddhists is precisely what it means to have faith. At the same time, the simple act of communicating this joy to others—of shakubuku or propagation—further deepens our sense of joy and experience of benefit.

“Not only that, but one should ponder the sutra passages . . . without the slightest thought of casting them away, as a woman refuses to part with her mirror, or as a man wears his sword.”

Here the Daishonin quotes two phrases from the Lotus Sutra. First, he cites the phrase “Honestly discarding expedient means” from the “Expedient Means” chapter. With this statement the Buddha declares that in revealing the true teaching of the Lotus Sutra he discards his provisional teaching, which he expounded as an expedient means. From the standpoint of the Buddha’s disciples, the passage also indicates that, upon hearing the true teaching from the Buddha, the disciples should discard their attachment to the Buddha’s earlier teachings, which are provisional “expedients” intended to lead people to the truth. They are not the truth itself, however. Next the Daishonin cites the phrase “Not accepting a single verse of the other sutras” from the “Simile and Parable” chapter. This passage also urges the Buddha’s disciples to take faith in the Lotus Sutra while severing their attachment to the provisional teachings.

From the viewpoint of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, these passages from the Lotus Sutra indicate that we should seek the direct path to our enlightenment in the Daishonin’s teaching while discarding our attachments to other teachings. Ambivalence in what teaching leads to true happiness, liberation and enlightenment can inhibit our progress toward those goals. On the other hand, a firm conviction that living by and sharing the Daishonin’s teaching with the world is the most noble way to live will be a force for unparalleled growth and happiness.

The Daishonin here encourages Myoichi to hold fast to the Gohonzon without being swayed by other teachings. Although we possess the Gohonzon, if we are constantly wondering whether or not there is an easier way to attain happiness and enlightenment, we cannot consider our faith to be genuine. Resolute faith in the Gohonzon will guide our lives along a direct path toward happiness, while confusion in the realm of faith will be mirrored in our daily lives as confusion and disorder. This is what is meant by the Buddhist

principle that “faith equals daily life.” In “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind” Nichiren Daishonin writes, “When the skies are clear, the ground is illuminated. Similarly, when one knows the Lotus Sutra, one understands the meaning of all worldly affairs” (WND, 376). Here we can interpret “knowing the Lotus Sutra” to mean a strong conviction that the Law of enlightenment revealed in the sutra and expressed by the Daishonin in the form of the Gohonzon exists in our own lives. And by dedicating ourselves to practice based on the Gohonzon, we can actualize that law in our lives. We can then put the wisdom, life-force and courage we gain to work in the real world.

In this sense, SGI President Ikeda comments in this month’s installment of “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra”: “How much are we thinking about kosen-rufu? About the Gohonzon? About the SGI or our fellow members? How much action did we take or not take? The net balance of these determines our state of life. Faith is not a matter of formality. ‘It is the heart that is important’ (WND, 1000).” In one sense, then, faith means to develop the conviction that true happiness lies in praying to the Gohonzon and striving for the happiness of others—just as we encourage one another to do in the SGI. And this is what it means to practice in accord with the intent of the sutra phrases “honestly discarding expedient means” and “not accepting a single verse of the other sutras.”

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.
2. Ibid., chap. 3.

Topics for Discussion:

1. The Daishonin says that faith is “nothing unusual.” But some of us at times become preoccupied with “how to chant” or “what to think about” in our prayer. How can we simplify our practice and free our minds from our preoccupation with being correct? Can we be naturally correct in our practice?

2. The joy we experience through faith is a driving force behind the dynamic spread of Buddhism, not to mention daily living. Practicing out of force of habit or a sense of obligation will dampen our enjoyment, and stifle our benefit and growth. Can you recall why you felt so excited about this Buddhist practice and the SGI and what moved you to tell a friend about it for the first time? How can we make our Buddhist practice as enjoyable as possible and help others do the same?