

WHAT IS FAITH? AND HOW DO WE STRENGTHEN IT? BY GEOFF ROHDE, SACRAMENTO, CALIF.

HOW IMPORTANT IS FAITH IN OUR PRACTICE OF BUDDHISM?

According to the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, faith is the basic requirement for entering the way of the Buddha. He also writes that our happiness depends on the strength of our faith. If you were ever told—or have somehow concluded—that faith is not necessary in the practice of this Buddhism, please begin the difficult task of changing your point of view.

What is “faith”?

While many people equate faith with belief, a specific church or religious doctrine, its Latin origin is much simpler: faith means “to trust.” Over the past 500 years, due in part to the atrocities committed in the name of religion, the word faith is often associated with adjectives like “unthinking,” “fanatical,” “unscientific” and “ignorant”. The current prevailing view seems to be that faith and intelligence do not mix. Our modern bias against [blind] faith makes real or genuine faith difficult to comprehend. We do not need blind faith, but a faith rooted in true reason. According to second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, all human action is based on some form of belief, be it a specific doctrine, or in scientific technology, consumerism, nationalism, racism, etc. Even a man who flaunts his atheism continues to live and act on the basis of some belief. Toda went so far as to state that all human affairs are a sum of actions rooted in faith, albeit a faith which is too often unexamined, if not dysfunctional. Since strong faith is important to our practice of Buddhism, and since the word faith has been so devalued, I’ve spent years reading, chanting and trying to find other words, metaphors or terminology to convey its significance and importance.

HOW DOES FAITH DEVELOP?

Profound, strong and unshakable faith, faith that moves mountains and alters the course of history, does not just happen. Faith develops in stages, much like morality, cognitive skills and psychosocial development. James W. Fowler, author of *The Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, describes the stages of faith.

1. Early Childhood (ages 1–6) Children imitate their parents. This indicates a bonding with the parents, with fantasy and imagination working in a developmentally appropriate way. Picture an infant clinging to a parent or gleefully jumping into a swimming pool and the waiting, trusted arms of a parent. Nichiren Daishonin sometimes uses analogies like this to illustrate how faith should be. However, most of us graduate from such instinctive, natural trust very early in life. It is all but impossible to rediscover this quality of faith.

2. Late Childhood (ages 6–12) Children are characterized by concrete, literal thinking. Authority rests outside the person and the reference group includes teachers, religious leaders, friends, relatives and media images. Belief that there is “one right way” brings a sense of security.

3. Early Adolescence (ages 12–15) This stage is distinguished by a desire for belonging, loyalty, harmony and conformity. People at this stage enjoy belonging to a group of individuals that hold the same beliefs. Authority [still] rests outside of the individual believer in the doctrine (or clergy) of their belief system. According to Fowler, a majority

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of church members in the United States operate at this level of faith.

4. Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood (ages 16–20s or even 30s) This stage is characterized by experimentation and a growing inner awareness, often leading to disillusionment, doubt and probing questions that challenge the established order. This quest is not the same as losing one’s faith for it represents a positive effort by the believer to take responsibility for his or her faith. This willingness to put up with doubt and uncertainty is crucial to the internalization of a secure faith. External authority gives way to internal integration.

To doubt the truths of Buddhism is only natural, as we are constantly exposed to news and advertisements, public and private tragedy and sufferings. But it is important to ask questions and resolve those doubts, as the following passages suggest.

- Ask him any questions you may have about the doctrines. If you do not question and resolve your doubts, you cannot dispel the dark clouds of illusion, any more than you could travel a thousand miles without legs. Have him read this letter again and again, and listen attentively. (“Letter to Niike,” WND, 1031)

- There are very few who ask about the meaning of the sutra in an effort to resolve their doubts and thus believe in it wholeheartedly. No matter how humble a person may be, if his wisdom is in the least bit greater than yours, you should ask him about the meaning of the sutra. (“The Fourteen Slanders,” WND, 757)

5. Integrated, Expansive Faith (ages 30+) This stage of faith is gained from serious reflection, spiritual “homework” and assimilation of the lessons of the four previous stages. There is a deep sense of internal rightness, lightness and joy when believers [re]construct for themselves the pillars of their faith. Values and behavior become centered around honesty, responsibility, service and honoring the spirit within others. People at this stage can identify with people of different races, socioeconomic status or ideological conviction. The Golden Rule is deeply felt; people are rarely threatened by differences and seldom see others as enemies because all people are sacred.

If we understand that our life at this moment is myo, then we will also understand that our life at other moments is the Mystic Law. (“On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” WND, 4)

6. Wisdom and Universalizing Faith This stage, according to Fowler, includes those few whose faith is one of total commitment to the guiding presence of God or ultimate authority, living at one with the spirit and in harmony with the universe. People living a universalizing faith may willingly defy social, political or even religious systems they consider unjust. They pay no attention to threats or danger to themselves. They act without malice toward those who may thwart their efforts. For example, within hours of the failed attempt on his life, Nichiren Daishonin ordered sake for the very soldiers who had tried to execute him!

“I might be compared to a summer insect that flies into a flame, or a mouse that dashes in front of a cat. I am like an animal that knows it is in danger and yet pays no heed. But I risk my life as a matter of conscious choice; therefore, I am a perverse person” (“The Swords of Good and Evil,” WND, 451).

They become a disciplined incarnation of activism. They are wholly committed to transforming this present world of suffering and injustice into God’s Kingdom—or a Buddha’s land—of transcendent harmony. Life is loved, but they are not overly attached to it. Their indifference to self-preservation and their ability to help others perceive the transcendent in themselves and others gives their actions extraordinary power and effect.

In their devotion to universal compassion, they may offend our narrow views of justice. Their ability to see through mundane and self-defeating desires often threatens our sense of purpose. Their enlarged vision of universal community reveals limited tribal and nationalistic thinking for the meager notions they are. Their leadership initiatives, often utilizing nonviolence and respect for opponents, disturb us. No wonder that such people frequently become martyrs to the visions they incarnate.

People at this stage are rare. They have become both living examples and creators of an all-inclusive, fulfilled human community. Others are drawn to gather around and support such a person because they create zones of liberation from the social, political, economic and ideological shackles we endure. They possess a special grace that makes them seem more lucid, more simple and somehow more fully human than the rest of us. Their community is universal in extent and they cherish diversity because it further expresses the universal oneness. They are ready for fellowship with people at any of the other stages of faith or from any other religious tradition.

Fowler believes that people do not set out to reach stage six, Wisdom and Universalizing Faith. He writes that these people are “selected by the great Blacksmith of history, heated in the fires of turmoil and trouble, and then hammered into shape on the hard anvil of conflict and struggle.”

Many of his writings show that Nichiren Daishonin was this type of person. So were each of the presidents of the Soka Gakkai. In fact, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda is constantly praising deeply compassionate individuals from all nations and faiths who exemplify the best of humanity. Let’s never forget that we, too, can reach this state of life. We need to have confidence that it exists nowhere else but within us. We must summon up profound courage, compassion, endurance and forbearance and unlock the powerful forces of the Buddha and the Law by strengthening the powers of our faith and practice.

IN WHAT DO SGI MEMBERS—THE DISCIPLES OF NICHIREN DAISHONIN—ACTUALLY HAVE FAITH?

How many of us find ourselves at a loss for words when a friend or relative remarks: “You’re a Buddhist. What do you believe in?” For years I was unable to say much more than the standard, “We chant for world peace and individual happiness.” Here are adaptations of the Daishonin’s writings that describe what we have faith in.

- I can free myself from the sufferings of birth and death I have endured throughout eternity and attain supreme enlightenment in this lifetime by awakening to and having profound faith in the mystic truth that has always been within my life.

- Chanting Myoho-renge-kyo with strong faith and total confidence in its power will enable me to grasp the mystic truth within me. (cf. “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” WND 3)

- Shakyamuni . . . the Lotus Sutra . . . and I, an ordinary human being, are in no way different or separate from one another. In fact, everything without exception is a manifestation of Myoho-renge-kyo. (cf. “The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life,” WND, 216)

- If my mind is impure (controlled by the poisons of greed, anger, delusion, fear, hate), so is my environment (physical, social, psychological). Conversely, if my mind is pure (total trust in and perception of myoho within my life), so is every aspect of my world. In other words, there are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves: The difference lies

solely in the good or evil of my mind (cf. “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” WND, 4).

- The stronger my faith, the greater the protective forces of the universe.
- The blessings gained by practicing the true Law are so great that I can change my karma to suffer terribly in the future by meeting relatively minor sufferings in this life. By strengthening my faith in the Lotus Sutra, I will rid my life of heavy sins from the past. (cf. “Letter to the Brothers,” WND, 497)

- No sickness can be an obstacle to my happiness if I believe in this mandala with all my heart. Because I embrace the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra I will be protected by Mother of Demon Children and her ten daughters, enjoy the happiness of Aizen and the good fortune of Bishamon. (cf. “Reply to Kyo’o,” WND, 412)

President Ikeda wrote that our faith is like a force of nature and that the greater our conviction that our prayers will be answered and the stronger our faith, the more powerfully the universe responds to our prayers. What we bring to the table is the power of our practice, that is, the strength of our daimoku and the energy with which we work for kosen-rufu for the happiness of all people and the prosperity of society (December 11, 1998 *World Tribune*, p. 8). The intense spiritual force or determination, which forms our strong prayers, reveals itself in the power of faith. These two powers induce the powers of the Buddha and the Law latent in our lives to function. The responsibility for results, however, rests upon each person, not upon any outside agent or Buddhist gods.

Effective, honest and sincere prayer changes something in the depths of the human heart. While that change may be invisible, it is never confined to one individual or even one community. Meaningful improvement and reformation of our social institutions begin with the change that takes place in the heart of one individual (cf. May 1995 *Seikyo Times*, p. 14).

Strong faith is like high voltage. While we cannot see electricity or prayer with our human eyes, steadfast prayers will transform our lives and surroundings, just as electricity has transformed our society. . . . Faith means having confidence in this invisible realm (cf. *Learning from the Goshō*, p. 90).

WHAT FAITH IS NOT— OR, HOW TO PRACTICE HARD AND CHANGE NOTHING.

Even though we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, if we think that enlightenment or the power to change our life is somewhere outside ourselves, we are not embracing Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings but some cheap imitation. We should never seek happiness and benefit outside ourselves. Our mastery of the Buddhist teachings—even hours and hours of dedicated chanting and going to meetings—will not relieve us of mortal sufferings in the least unless we perceive (sense, know, feel) the nature of our own life. This is why the relationship between faith and perception is stressed above. If we seek enlightenment outside ourselves, any discipline or good deed will be meaningless. What’s worse, unless we perceive the true, mystic and infinite nature of our life, our practice of this wonderful Buddhism will become an endless, painful austerity (cf. “On Attaining Buddhahood,” WND, 3).

Another major stumbling block to enlightenment and true human revolution is to disconnect our practice and faith from our thoughts, words and behavior. Here is what Nichiren Daishonin wrote:

There are various stages in the practice of this sutra [and various forms of slander exist accordingly]. . . . “One scholar enumerates . . . ‘fourteen evil causes: (1) arrogance, (2) negligence, (3) wrong views of the self (4) shallow understanding, (5) attachment to earthly desires, (6) not understanding, (7) not believing, (8) scowling with knitted brows, (9) harboring doubts, (10) slandering, (11) despising, (12) hating, (13) envying and (14) bearing grudges.’” Since these fourteen slanders apply equally to priesthood and laity, you must be on guard against them.” (“The Fourteen Slanders,” WND, 756)

The letter “Questions and Answers about Embracing the Lotus Sutra” explicitly warns us about three major problems on the path of human revolution: a) lack of faith, b) anger and arrogance, c) preoccupation with fame and profit.

lack of faith is the basic failing that causes a person to fall into hell. Therefore, the sutra states, “If with regard to this sutra one should harbor doubt and fail to believe, one will fall at once into the evil paths.” (“Questions and Answers about Embracing the Lotus Sutra,” WND, 60) “Now, if you wish to attain Buddhahood, you have only to lower the banners of your arrogance, cast aside the staff of your anger, and devote yourself exclusively to the one vehicle of the Lotus Sutra. Worldly fame and profit are mere baubles of your present existence, and arrogance and prejudice are ties that will fetter you in a future one. Ah, you should be ashamed of them! And you should fear them, too!” (“Questions and Answers about Embracing the Lotus Sutra,” WND, 58–59).

What does “lack of faith” mean? It means doubting, giving up and not fighting against the undertow of discouragement. It also means pre-judging the blessings of the Gohonzon or linking our happiness to the immediate satisfaction of our non-negotiable demands of the moment. While we may want events to go as we wish, they sometimes do not. Should we abandon or slacken our faith on such occasions? This would be a terrible mistake. As Nichiren Daishonin advised Shigo Kingo:

It is the nature of ordinary people not to know what awaits them in the future. . . . You have only your two fiefs. This life is like a dream. One cannot be sure that one will live until tomorrow. However wretched a beggar you might become, never disgrace the Lotus Sutra. Since it will be the same in any event, do not betray grief. . . . Even if your fiefs should be confiscated or you yourself driven out, you must think that it is due to the workings of the ten demon daughters, and wholeheartedly entrust yourself to them. (“A Warning against Begrudging One’s Fief,” WND, 824)

President Ikeda has also given us many recommendations and admonitions regarding how not to practice. For example, he said, “If you practice faith, yet have an attitude of complaint, you will destroy your good fortune in direct proportion. Others do not respect those who are full of complaint. From both Buddhist and secular perspectives, their behavior does not befit a wise or worthy person” (*Faith into Action*, p. 11).

He also said: “Much human misery arises from people despairing over things that despair cannot help. We should not worry about things that no amount of worry will resolve. The important thing is to build a golden palace of joy in our hearts that nothing can disturb—a state of life like the clear blue sky above the storm” (*ibid.*, p. 134).

Here is an example that illustrates President Ikeda’s point. Riding a horse is not always smooth and easy. It takes practice and skill to learn how to move with the animal and absorb the unavoidable bumps and shocks in your legs rather than your bottom and backbone. It makes no sense at all to whine about the horse; it moves as it will. How you

carry yourself in the saddle determines your comfort. It's the same on a ship in rough seas. It rolls, pitches and heaves . . . and so do you. Whining about the constant movement of the boat is futile. That's just how ocean travel is. Wisdom is learning to walk in rhythm with the ocean.

Once our prayers are broadcast into the universe and our powerful, appropriate actions begin, let's not obsess about [immediate] results. Keep going joyfully until you succeed. Letting go of impatience and fear is an essential step toward our happiness. It is also what real faith is all about. Since our thoughts, words, and deeds will, and in fact, already have, altered the course of events, we can move on and be happy no matter what. Developing such profound trust in the four powers is a big part of letting go of an unhealthy and unproductive desire to micromanage the world around us. I believe this is what Nichiren told Sairen-bo when he wrote:

“Be resolved to summon forth the great power of your faith, and chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo with the prayer that your faith will be steadfast and correct at the moment of your death. Never seek any other way to inherit the ultimate Law of life and death, and manifest it in your life. Only then will you realize that earthly desires are enlightenment, and that the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana. Even embracing the Lotus Sutra would be useless without the heritage of faith” (“The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life,” WND, 218).

Indeed, to face death without fear or anger, to endure sickness or misfortune and maintain a healthy, happy countenance takes very strong faith. Here are portions of two letters written to Shijo Kingo:

“Though worldly troubles may arise, never let them disturb you. No one can avoid problems, not even sages or worthies. Drink sake only at home with your wife, and chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life, and continue chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, no matter what happens. How could this be anything other than the boundless joy of the Law? Strengthen your power of faith more than ever” (“Happiness in This World,” WND, 681).

Nichiren Daishonin was joyful despite the hardships he endured. When things went well, he encouraged his followers, and when things went badly, he did exactly the same thing. Even when in exile or suffering life-threatening persecutions, he considered himself the richest, happiest man in all of Japan and continued to work tirelessly for the happiness of others. That was his faith.

Our faith colors our perceptions—the way we see the world. By strengthening our faith, we develop the eyes of the Buddha to see the world as it really is. As we strengthen our faith we manifest the life and behavior of the Buddha.