

**FROM SGI-USA WOMEN'S LEADER MATILDA BUCK
PRAYER: A REAL FORCE FOR CHANGE
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A woman is walking along a river bank, looking for a way to cross to the other side. Finally, she sees someone on the opposite bank and yells across, “Hey, how do you get to the other side?”

The other person yells back, “You already are on the other side!”

Perspective. Perspective in anything, especially in life, can make all the difference. In fact, a change in perspective — especially to one that's clear and lofty — is one of the great benefits of our Buddhist practice. In this article, I would like to look at perspective in terms of prayer. After all, our practice entails very focused prayer twice a day — how can we make that prayer a real force for change in our lives?

Here's a quiz. True or false — “When I chant to the Gohonzon...”

- I feel that something must be wrong with me.
- I doubt I can overcome my problems.
- I doubt I can reach my goals.
- I feel victimized by life.
- I relate to penitents and martyrs.
- I feel I don't deserve to pray for my own happiness.
- I want the Gohonzon to reward me.
- I believe the Gohonzon is punishing me.
- I want the Gohonzon to save me.

If you answered “yes” to even one statement, first: don't feel alone. Second: keep reading.

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism empowers each individual to bring forth his or her Buddhahood. This is a conscious posture we should try to take as we chant. Repeat after me: “At the core of my life, I am a Buddha. I can tap this power through my strong prayer. I can move toward my desires and I can contribute to my world.”

It sounds good, but for many of us, this is a difficult posture to sustain.

Not only do self-limiting attitudes (“Something must be wrong with me; things always fall through”) often seem natural and real, but the truth — that we are Buddhas — may seem unnatural, even preposterous and arrogant. This is how we feel, even though Nichiren Daishonin tells us repeatedly that Buddhahood is our true identity, and even though the Lotus Sutra, which we repeat twice a day, reveals that we all have the potential for Buddhahood just as we are. The idea that we have a deeper identity from which we can make this empowered prayer often is still theory for many of us.

To mark the women's meetings last February, President Ikeda sent us a beautiful message that addressed this very thing, asking us to become happy based on our profound and strong prayer. He referred to Nichiren Daishonin's letter “The One Essential Phrase,” which reads in part:

“Even though one neither reads nor studies the sutra, chanting the title alone is the source of tremendous good fortune. The sutra teaches that women, evil men, and those in the realms of animals and hell — in fact, all the beings of the Ten Worlds — can attain Buddhahood in their present form. [This is an incomparably greater wonder than] fire being produced by a stone taken from the bottom of a river, or a lantern lighting up a place

that has been dark for a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand years. If even the most ordinary things of this world are such wonders, then how much more wondrous is the power of the Buddhist Law!” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 923)

In his message, President Ikeda focuses on this phrase about the lantern that instantly lights a cave that has been dark for even 10,000 years. “The moment we sit in front of the Gohonzon and offer prayers, the sun of Buddhahood, the originally enlightened state inherent in our lives, arises, sending out brilliant lights,” he writes. But how many of us sit with that feeling as we chant to the Gohonzon? Up until a few years ago, I know I didn’t.

Don’t get me wrong. In my first two decades of practice, I had changed from a sad and confused person to one who could feel optimistic most of the time. I was able to turn around some tough situations, and I appreciated that I had found a noble and fulfilling way to live.

I also learned how to cope much better with the pain in my life. I kept this pain in a deep, dark cave at the pit of my life, hidden from my consciousness. But I could feel it, at a very deep level. That’s how carefully I had accommodated it all my life, working around it so I wouldn’t have to deal with it. It translated as a small voice that told me I would always live with pain, with restriction. I could build a lot of positive causes and effects on top of it, I could improve my situation, I could grow spiritually, but that dark cave would remain unchanged.

Until, that is, the lantern of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo exposed that cave and gave me enough light to see this reality at last. But it was not an easy process.

“I wonder,” I said to myself (and “wonder” was really the beginning of the process), “if I really believe that the core of my life is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, or is it instead this deep acceptance of pain, the belief that I will never be without it?”

The answer that came back was a shock: “You have always lived with this pain,” my little voice in the cave said. “There is no other way. This is the true reality of your life.”

Another voice countered with: “Nichiren Daishonin says the fundamental reality of my life is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo — Buddhahood. You can become truly happy.”

How could I deserve that kind of happiness? I thought, “Well, if I am a Buddha, I should become happy, but to tell the truth, I can’t imagine it. It doesn’t feel OK to be happy.” What could I do?

I decided to try a new perspective, to chant from the perspective of a Buddha. I faked it for a while. I kept repeating to myself: “My life is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo; I am a Buddha; I am living as a Bodhisattva of the Earth; therefore, I can bring this power out and solve my problem. Not only do I deserve to be happy, I must become happy; that’s how I will demonstrate the Great Law.”

Because I was trying to chant from a different perspective, an empowered perspective, I began to see things differently. Small, almost imperceptible changes appeared. Think about that cave: Nothing could be more immutable than a place that’s been dark for 10,000 years. But even a little light that is shed consistently has an immediate, though inconspicuous, effect. Life that needs absolute darkness cannot continue; it will evolve or disappear. Life that needs light will begin to develop. The ecology of the cave will never be the same.

That’s what happened in my own life as I kept that light of my Buddhahood, that new, conscious perspective, going. Within one year, I had concretely changed a problem that had been with me all of my life. Inside my hidden cave, that which fed on darkness shrank, and what needed light grew and thrived and eventually bloomed into an undeniable

happiness.

Theoretically, I had known these principles for a very long time, but I think unconsciously the doubt that I could ever change that part of my life was so strong that it squelched any hope of trying, so I often chanted as though the Gohonzon “out there” might reward me for good behavior, but certainly I didn’t have the power to change this — it was too eternal and omnipresent. Consciously changing my perspective in my prayer, coming from the perspective that I was a Buddha and had the power of Buddhahood, helped me overcome my doubt and continue until I saw victory.

Overcoming doubt is a big issue when it comes to prayer. Praying from the empowered perspective of Buddhahood will help us overcome doubt. This is how President Ikeda encourages us: “One thing is certain: The power of belief, the power of thought, will move reality in the direction of what we believe and conceive of it. If you really believe you can do something, you can. This is a fact. When you clearly envision a victorious outcome, engrave it in your heart and are firmly convinced that you will attain it, your brain makes every effort to realize the mental image you have created. And then, through your unceasing efforts, that victory is finally made a reality.”

In closing, I would like to share some points on challenging doubt. In the *World Tribune* last year, Editor in Chief Ted Morino explains that doubt-free faith is not a fixed condition and does not mean unquestioning faith. In fact, questions are good. They lead us to delve more deeply in faith and strengthen our life-state. As we grapple with doubt, we build our own deep conviction. When we make the decision “I am going to look at this from the perspective of Buddhahood, not just my own fearfulness or cynicism or whatever,” doors will open. Ted describes the process of overcoming doubt and gaining both self-confidence and a stronger practice, based on the nine consciousnesses:

- ❖ First, using the six consciousnesses, choose to chant with trust in the Gohonzon and in the Buddhahood inherent in our own lives. Couple this with 100 percent effort — that is, prayer plus action — to win day by day. This is the basis for the rest of the steps. (This refers to the first six of the nine consciousnesses: the senses of hearing, sight, taste, touch, smell and conscious thought.)

- ❖ Second, persevere in this kind of effort, thus increasing our trust in ourselves subconsciously (the seventh consciousness).

- ❖ Third, as we continue this way, “to trust ourselves will become our tendency,” writes Ted Morino, “which is called karma” (the eighth consciousness).

- ❖ Fourth, as we practice Buddhism with positive feelings, our joy and self-confidence grow and we truly enjoy living, experiencing the fullness of the Law. This is the proof that we can strengthen our Buddhahood (ninth consciousness). In this life-condition, our self-confidence — our confidence in our Buddhahood — is unshakable.

Like the two people facing each other on the riverbank, happiness is a matter of perspective, of where you choose to stand. To achieve our own great happiness, to have the compassion and stamina to serve humanity, we need the power of the perspective of Buddhahood.

We are, all of us, already on the other side. Through a strong empowered prayer, we can begin to know this.