

# FAITH AND PRACTICE ACTIVATE THE GOHONZON'S POWER— “OPENING THE EYES OF WOODEN AND PAINTED IMAGES” IS AN ANCIENT RELIGIOUS RITE RELEVANT TO NICHIREN DAISHONIN'S OBJECT OF DEVOTION?

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“The Buddha possesses thirty-two features. All of them represent the physical aspect. Thirty-one of them ... belong to the category of visible and non-coextensive<sup>1</sup> physical characteristics. They can therefore be depicted in tangible form, such as pictures or statues. The remaining feature, the pure and far-reaching voice, belongs to the category of invisible and coextensive physical attributes. It therefore cannot be captured either in a painting or wooden image.

Since the Buddha's passing, two kinds of images, wooden and painted, have been made of him. They possess thirty-one features but lack the pure and far-reaching voice. Therefore, they are not equal to the Buddha. They are also devoid of the spiritual aspect.... When one places a sutra in front of a wooden or painted image of the Buddha, the image becomes endowed with all thirty-two features. Yet even though it has the thirty-two features, without spiritual aspect it is in no way equal to a Buddha...” (“Opening the Eyes of Wooden and Painted Images,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 85).

## Customs of the Day

In 1264 Japan, when Nichiren Daishonin wrote the letter, “Opening the Eyes of Wooden and Painted Images,” it was a Buddhist custom to pray to wooden statues or paintings of various Bud-dhas and bodhisattvas. It was believed that a religious rite known as an “eye-opening” ceremony could endow a religious object with the spiritual properties of the Buddha it represented, thus enhancing its power as an object of devotion. Images of Amida<sup>2</sup> Buddha, for example, were popular at the time, and were thought to be infused with his spirit through ceremonies that involved placing either the Flower Garland Sutra or the Mahavairochana<sup>3</sup> Sutra before it.

Nichiren Daishonin refuted the value of these ceremonies, declaring these rituals using various sutras could not infuse a statue or painting with either the voice or the spiritual aspect of the Buddha. Therefore, the object could “in no way equal a Buddha.” He went on to offer proof from the writings of T'ien-t'ai and Miao-lo that the Lotus Sutra alone manifests the Buddha's mind, affirming that “those words are in themselves the Buddha's mind” (WND, 86).

Thus, only the Lotus Sutra was useful in performing eye-opening ceremonies for statues or paintings.

## A Step Toward Establishing the Gohonzon

That “the Buddha's mind found expression in the written words of the Lotus Sutra” was a key point in the Daishonin's instruction to his followers. Prayer to Amida Buddha—based on the provisional, pre-Lotus Sutra teachings of Shakyamuni—represented the belief that happiness could only be achieved through rebirth in the “Land of Eternal Bliss,” with Amida Buddha acting as an intermediary. In contrast, the Lotus Sutra—Shakyamuni's essential teaching—contains at its heart the promise that, through the

Mystic Law, everyone can attain enlightenment in this lifetime—where they are and as they are, through their own faith and efforts.

Nichiren Daishonin defined the core of the Lotus Sutra as the phrase Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, which he later manifested in the mandala called the Gohonzon. However, when he wrote, “Opening the Eyes of Wooden and Painted Images,” the Daishonin had yet to inscribe the Gohonzon bestowed upon the entire world. And, although he provisionally approved the act of making images of Shakyamuni Buddha in this letter, with the instruction that the Lotus Sutra be used in the ceremony to “open its eyes,” it was not his ultimate intention. It was, at least, a step away from people’s attachment to Amida Buddha, and toward a better understanding of Buddhism. However, considering subsequent events in his life—the Tatsunokuchi Persecution and Sado Exile that led to his inscription of the Gohonzon—we can understand this letter to be preparation for conceiving the Gohonzon, the true object of devotion.

### **No need for statues or paintings**

Once the Gohonzon had been established, there was no longer a need for statues and paintings as objects of devotion. According to Nichiren Daishonin, this is because each of us has the potential to reveal our own Buddhahood. Praying to a statue or painting, however, tends to mislead people to exalt and worship the being it represents while diverting them from their own inherent enlightenment. Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism teaches that people and the Law of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo are one.

Statues or paintings glorify an external phenomenon rather than the law of life. The Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin represents both his enlightened life state and the Law, depicting the inseparability of the Person and the Law. Therefore, in an age when we have the Gohonzon—the blueprint for the enlightenment of ordinary people—the worship of statues and paintings is mistaken.

In the writing “Questions and Answers on the Object of Devotion,” Nichiren Daishonin states, “The daimoku [Nam-myoho-enge-kyo] of the Lotus Sutra should be the object of devotion” and “We should employ as an object of devotion that which is superior” (*Gosho Zenshu*, 365-66). The Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin is the very essence of the Lotus Sutra.

### **Enlightenment Inherent in the Gohonzon**

By inscribing the words “Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, Nichiren” down the center of the Gohonzon, Nichiren Daishonin made it very clear that the Law exists within his life as well the lives of all people. In another letter on this subject, “On Consecrating an Image of Shakyamuni Buddha Made by Shijo Kingo,” written in 1276, the Daishonin writes:

It is the power of the Lotus Sutra that makes it possible to infuse such paintings and statues with a ‘soul’ or spiritual property. This was the realization of the great Teacher T’ien-t’ai. In the case of living beings, this doctrine is known as the attaining of Buddhahood in one’s present form; in the case of painted and wooden images, it is known as the enlightenment of plants and trees. (WND, 684)

[For “the enlightenment of plants and trees”, see sidebar, this page]

Nichiren Daishonin also wrote, “Now in the Latter day of the Law, the ‘eye’ is the great Mandala [the Gohonzon] that was never before revealed. There is no ‘eye’ apart from this Gohonzon” (GZ, 841).

From these explanations it is clear that the Gohonzon does not need to be empowered, given a ‘soul,’ or otherwise enhanced by a special person or ritual. Rather, it releases the power of our lives by allowing us to open our eyes to our inherent Buddhahood. No action or ceremony is required to further infuse it. The Daishonin’s Gohonzon is a “perfectly endowed” object of devotion.

Historically, it was thought that only a priest or person with exceptional status could perform the ‘eye-opening’ ceremony to empower an otherwise inanimate object with the Buddha’s spiritual property, to make it an object of devotion. The Daishonin’s Gohonzon, however, by his own definition, needs no such process.

### **Our practice activates the beneficial power of the Gohonzon**

According to Nichiren Daishonin, it is also true, though, that the Gohonzon’s beneficial power does need to be activated by the faith and practice of the individual practitioner. This is explained by the principle of the four powers, the powers of faith, practice, Buddha and Law. We manifest the powers of the Buddha and the Law inherent in the Gohonzon through the power of our own faith and practice. In other words, simply having a Gohonzon does not bring benefit. Practice to the Gohonzon does. We activate the Gohonzon’s power when we chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo to it.

With this knowledge, let’s take another look at the passage in “Opening the Eyes of Wooden and Painted Images” where the Daishonin writes, “Since the Buddha’s passing, two kinds of images, wooden and painted, have been made of him. They possess thirty-one features but lack the pure and far-reaching voice. Therefore, they are not equal to the Buddha. They are also devoid of the spiritual aspect” (WND, 85).

We know through experience that without our own efforts in the practice of faith (to the Gohonzon) — morning and evening prayers and the chanting of daimoku— although perfectly complete as an object of devotion, the powers of the Buddha and the Law in the Gohonzon remain in a state of potentiality.

Without sounding too Zen-like, is a TV a TV without someone watching it? A TV may be complete in all respects and ready to perform its function, but unless it is plugged in, turned on and watched, the purpose for which it was made cannot be fulfilled. In that sense, for a TV to be a TV it requires someone watching it. Without a practitioner the Gohonzon cannot fulfill the purpose for which it was inscribed. Although the Gohonzon is still a Gohonzon, practice to it is necessary in order for its influence to be experienced in our lives.

### **When Prayer Is Not Enough**

By inscribing the Gohonzon, making it widely available and instructing us to faithfully chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo to it, the Daishonin gave us both the means and responsibility to activate it. In a sense, we complete the work that the Daishonin began when he inscribed the Gohonzon. The Daishonin states that the voice does the Buddha’s work. Hence, chanting to the Gohonzon can be understood as adding the far-reaching voice of the Buddha.

But is chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo enough? There are many other Nichiren sects whose practice and that of the SGI appear to be the same — chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, reciting the sutra to the Gohonzon, studying the Daishonin’s writings, and spreading the teachings.

At the time of Nichiren Daishonin's death in 1282, there were five senior priests in addition to his successor, Nikko Shonin. They also continued to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and yet according to Nikko, they betrayed the Daishonin's intent. Nikko Shonin denounced their practice. How can that be? They all chanted the same Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, yet we consider only Nikko Shonin to have correctly inherited the purity of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. What's the difference?

### **Our Faith Makes the Difference**

In "On Attaining Buddhahood," Nichiren Daishonin wrote:

Nevertheless, even though you chant and believe in Myoho-renge-kyo, if you think the Law is outside yourself, you are embracing not the Mystic Law but an inferior teaching. "Inferior teaching" means those other than this [Lotus] sutra, which are all expedient and provisional. No expedient or provisional teaching leads directly to enlightenment, and without the direct path to enlightenment you cannot attain Buddhahood, even if you practice lifetime after lifetime for countless kalpas. Attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime is then impossible. Therefore, when you chant *myoho* and recite *rengé*, you must summon up deep faith that *Myoho-renge-kyo* is your life itself. [A]lthough they study Buddhism, their views are no different from those of non-Buddhists. (WND, 3,4)

This is a remarkable passage because it says that one can chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and practice Buddhism and still not be a Buddhist. Actions alone are not enough. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is not a magic formula that produces benefit for every person every time they pray. Most of us have experienced times when in spite of our prayers we were not changing things positively. How is this possible? What else is required of us?

Nichiren Daishonin explained, "When you chant myoho and recite rengé, you must summon up deep faith that Myoho-renge-kyo is your life itself" (WND, 3). The attitude, confidence or intention with which we pray — what might be called the mind of faith — is also extremely important. In other words, the quality of our prayer is important. As Nichiren Daishonin wrote in the "The True Aspect of All Phenomena," "If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth" (WND, 385). When we pray with "the same mind as Nichiren" — adding the spiritual aspect of the Buddha's life — we can receive benefit, change our karma, and attain Buddhahood. Practicing with faith based on a strong desire to achieve kosen-rufu is what "the same mind as Nichiren" means.

In "On Opening the Eyes of Wooden and Painted Images," Nichiren Daishonin states: "Even though it may resemble the Buddha in appearance, in reality it remains the same insentient plant from which it originated" (WND, 87). For those praying without the same mind as Nichiren, the Gohonzon remains a piece of paper — its full power is never activated. But those who chant daimoku with the same intent as the Buddha are able to activate the Gohonzon's power and simultaneously tap into the Buddhahood originally inherent within their own lives.

### **The Buddha's Voice and Heart Activate the Object of Worship**

Nichiren Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon for us to chant to and taught us to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo (the far-reaching voice of the Buddha) with the same mind or heart as the Buddha (the spiritual aspect). When we do so, we are activating the Gohonzon's latent power. Hence, his statement that "it is the heart that is important"

(WND, 1000).

We are then practicing in exact accord with the Daishonin's intent behind the inscription of the object of devotion. When we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with trust in the power of the Gohonzon, the Buddha state in our environment (Gohonzon) and the Buddha state inherent in the depths of our lives rise to greet each other. By striving, so to speak, to pull the life of Buddha out of our Gohonzon, we pull it up from the depths of our lives. This fusion of objective reality with our subjective wisdom is the significance of the Daishonin's inscription of the Gohonzon and our practice to it. We, in fact, complete the Buddha's work; work that only a Buddha could do. SGI President Ikeda writes:

"The Gohonzon is in truth the entity of the life of the original Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin. It is endowed with the inexhaustible powers of the Buddha and the Law. Therefore, it is not some formality, but the powers of faith and practice of those who revere the Gohonzon that count.

"The power of the Buddha and the power of the Law of the Gohonzon become manifest in accordance with the powers of faith and practice, correct and strong, that we exert.

"Eye-opening ceremonies performed by (slandorous) priests who lack the powers of faith and practice have absolutely no meaning. There is no need whatsoever for such ceremonies.

"Rather, the practice of us who live for kosen-rufu, who morning and evening sit up straight before and pray to the Gohonzon, is one that accords with Nichiren Daishonin's original teaching of the 'opening of the eyes.'" (*Selected Speeches*, 10)

It is the prayers of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, chanting daimoku infused with a dedication to propagating the Law, with the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin, which can activate the Gohonzon's power. To the extent that the Gohonzon needs to be activated, it is the power of each believer's faith and practice which can, in practical terms, "open the eyes" of the Gohonzon.

*One of the sources for this article was "Opening the Eyes of Wooden or Painted Images" by Kazuo Fuji, which appeared in the March, 1999 UK Express.*

1. coextensive—adj., having the quality of extending equally in time and space.
2. Amida Buddha—The Buddha of the Pure Land of Perfect Bliss worshipped by followers of the Pure Land sect.
3. Mahavairochana Sutra—One of the three basic scriptures of esoteric Buddhism. Esoteric teachings are revealed secretly or exclusively, intended for the specially initiated alone.

## **The Enlightenment of Plants**

The enlightenment of plants, trees, rocks, the land itself or all insentient beings derives from the principle of "three thousand realms in a single moment of life." One of its components is the realm of the environment or objective world. A living being and its nonliving environment, or sentient and insentient beings, are one and both manifest the same true entity of life. Both have the same potential for Buddhahood. There are two ways insentient beings can attain Buddhahood. The first is when a sentient being attains Buddhahood, the same state of life is simultaneously induced in its surroundings in

accordance with the principle that life and its environment are inseparable. The second is by being made into an object of devotion. When the Buddha's life is embodied in paper or wood, that paper or wood becomes an entity that manifests the Buddha nature from within itself. This is the principle underlying the inscription of the Gohonzon as an object of devotion.

### **Contradicting Nichiren Daishonin**

In contrast to the Daishonin's letters and treatises affirming the enlightenment inherent in the Gohonzon, the priests of Nichiren Shoshu persist in teaching a different view of the eye-opening ceremony. Furthermore, they claim that "one should never worship anything as a Gohonzon that has not been authorized as such by the high priest, who has inherited the Heritage of the Law, even if it was inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin himself" (translation of an article from Japanese-language publication *Daibyakuho*, autumn 1993).

In making this statement, Nichiren Shoshu asserts that unless an eye-opening ceremony has been conducted on the Gohonzon by the high priest, it is a counterfeit. Nichiren Shoshu believes that the Gohonzon must be infused with power. They believe only the high priest can accomplish this. And they believe that the high priest can reverse the process of infusing. These beliefs are consistent with the provisional understanding of the eye-opening ceremony refuted by Nichiren Daishonin in this letter.

Furthermore, they assert that the high priest can deactivate a Gohonzon inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin himself. This is an obvious contradiction of the Daishonin's own words and attempts to place the high priest above the Daishonin by asserting that the high priest has the power to override, so to speak, the Daishonin's own efforts. To accept this one must discard all of the Daishonin's teachings about the eye-opening ceremony.