Western attitudes toward body and mind have long been characterized by dualism, which could be described as the presumption of an absolute distinction between body and spirit. The eighteenth-century French mathematician and philosopher Descartes described the mind as a nonphysical thing, distinct from yet interacting with the physical entity of the body.

In contrast with this is the view of materialism, which regards both body and mind as physical phenomena. Modern science and medicine seem to lend support to this latter view: Emotional states have been shown to be accompanied by measurable physical changes in the brain and nervous system. Physical damage to the brain can have profound effects on mental and emotional functions. That one’s mental or psychological state can affect the immune system, and hence recovery from disease, is largely accepted by science today. Taken to its extreme conclusion, however, materialism is dehumanizing, regarding all living things as little more than sophisticated machines or chemical processes.

From the standpoint of Buddhism, however, both of these views may be described as limited. The philosophy of the Lotus Sutra stresses the principle of the “oneness of body and mind.” Body is that which has visible form, or can be measured or seen. Mind is the realm of thought, intent or spirit—that which is invisible. Oneness is a translation of a term that literally means “not two,” which in turn is an abbreviation of “two but not two.” This implies that body and mind, or form and spirit, appear to be distinct entities, and in some ways may be described as such; but on the deepest level both are expressions of the same core reality that is life itself.

In The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings, Nichiren Daishonin points out that the word nam of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo derives from Sanskrit and is translated into Chinese as two characters, one meaning “dedication” and the other meaning “life.” He then states: “Dedication’ refers to the element of physical form as it pertains to us, while ‘life’ refers to the element of mind as it pertains to us. But the ultimate teaching tells us that form and mind are not two things” (p. 3). From the viewpoint of Buddhism, then, body and mind are neither separate entities, as described in dualism, nor are both simply expressions of purely physical phenomena. In fact, Buddhism views all phenomena, even insentient things, as having both a physical and a spiritual aspect, and sees all as expressions of the Mystic Law.

Both body and mind, rooted in the eternal common source of life itself, the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, are part and parcel of life’s ultimate reality.

Nichiren also writes: “One’s thoughts are expressed in one’s voice. The mind represents the spiritual aspect, and the voice, the physical aspect. . . . A person can know another’s mind by listening to the voice. This is because the physical aspect reveals the spiritual aspect”
When we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with concern for other people (mind), our words and actions (body) toward them can uplift their spirits (mind), which can in turn lead to a positive change in their physical health and also in their own words and actions (body).

Referring to this process, SGI President Ikeda has said: “This is a prime example of the oneness of body and mind. Just a few words of sincere encouragement can have a very powerful effect on a sick person” (translated from December 17, 2005, Seikyo Shimbun, p. 3).

Nichiren also says, “When one livens other people’s complexions, one livens one’s own too, when one gives them strength, one gives oneself strength too, when one prolongs their lives, one prolongs one’s own life as well” (“On Clothing and Food,” WND-2, 1066).

A truly happy person may be described as one who feels inner peace and satisfaction (mind), enjoys a vibrant life force and behaves in a way that brings satisfaction and joy to others (body).

When we exert ourselves in body and mind, praying, talking and acting for the sake of others’ well-being, we contribute simultaneously to our own physical health and spiritual well-being.

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