

The Gohonzon

A famous passage from the writings of Nichiren Daishonin states, “I, Nichiren, have inscribed my life in sumi ink, so believe in the Gohonzon with your whole heart” (“Reply to Kyo’o,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 412).

Honzon is a Japanese word meaning “object of fundamental respect or devotion.” The prefix *go* means “worthy of honor.” While Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the ultimate law of the universe, the Gohonzon is its graphic expression. As we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, focusing on the Gohonzon, we activate within us the power of this Law.

Every religion has an object of devotion. In many, it is a supreme being or god. The many schools of Buddhism have traditionally revered the Buddha and the Buddha’s teachings. The concept of the Buddha and the content of the teachings, however, have differed from school to school.

For example, Shakyamuni Buddha was an ordinary human being who achieved a profound awakening and dedicated his life to freeing people from suffering and leading them to enlightenment. But after his passing, people came to worship him as they would a deity. They prayed to his statue or image in hope of winning his blessings.

Nichiren taught that people who view the Buddha or the Law as separate from themselves cannot realize their full potential. He said, “If you think the Law is outside yourself, you are embracing not the Mystic Law but an inferior teaching” (“On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” WND-1, 3).

A Clear Mirror of Life

In contrast to worshiping the Buddha or Law as externals, the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China, basing his teaching on the Lotus Sutra,

set forth a meditative discipline for attaining enlightenment. He called this “observing the mind.” T’ien-t’ai’s philosophy recognized the potential for Buddhahood in all people. But his practice was too difficult to carry out amid the challenges of daily life. Only those of superior ability, living in secluded circumstances, had a chance of attaining enlightenment.

Nichiren Daishonin established a teaching and practice to directly awaken the innate enlightened nature in any human being—the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo (see pp. 11–15). Enlightenment, more than just a state of mind, encompasses the totality of our mental, spiritual and physical being, as well as our behavior. Introspection alone, as in T’ien-t’ai’s teachings, is inadequate for attaining enlightenment.

Nichiren inscribed the Gohonzon to serve as a mirror to reflect our innate enlightened nature and cause it to permeate every aspect of our lives. SGI President Ikeda states: “Mirrors reflect our outward form. The mirror of Buddhism, however, reveals the intangible aspect of our lives. Mirrors, which function by virtue of the laws of light and reflection, are a product of human wisdom. On the other hand, the Gohonzon, based on the law of the universe and life itself, is the culmination of the Buddha’s wisdom and makes it possible for us to attain Buddhahood by providing us with a means of perceiving the true aspect of our life” (*My Dear Friends in America*, third edition, p. 94).

And just as we would not expect a mirror to apply our makeup, shave our beards or fix our hair, when we chant to the Gohonzon, we do not expect the scroll in our altars to fulfill our wishes. Rather, with faith in the power of the Mystic Law that the Gohonzon embodies, we chant to reveal the power of our own enlightened wisdom and vow to put it to use for the good of ourselves and others.

Nichiren, emphasizing the nature of the Gohonzon’s power, writes: “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon

exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (“The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon,” WND-1, 832).

An Expression of Nichiren’s Winning State of Life

From childhood, Nichiren Daishonin ignited within himself a powerful determination to rid the world of misery and lead people to lasting happiness. With this vow, he thoroughly studied the sutras and identified chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as the practice that embodies the essence of Shakyamuni’s teachings. In the course of propagating this practice, Nichiren overcame numerous harsh persecutions, including attempts on his life.

After the failed attempt to execute him at Tatsunokuchi in 1271, Nichiren began to inscribe the Gohonzon and bestow it upon staunch believers. Regarding this, he said: “From that time, I felt pity for my followers because I had not yet revealed this true teaching to any of them. With this in mind, I secretly conveyed my teaching to my disciples from the province of Sado” (“Letter to Misawa,” WND-1, 896).

Nichiren emerged victorious over the most powerful religious and secular oppression, and resolved to leave a physical expression of his winning state of life so all future disciples could bring forth that same life condition.

Writing to his samurai disciple Shijo Kingo, he stated: “In inscribing this Gohonzon for [your daughter’s] protection, Nichiren was like the lion king. This is what the sutra means by ‘the power [of the Buddhas] that has the lion’s ferocity.’ Believe in this mandala with all your heart. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?” (“Reply to Kyo’o,” WND-1, 412).

The Treasure Tower

“The Emergence of the Treasure Tower,” the 11th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, describes a gigantic tower adorned with precious treasures emerging from beneath the earth and hovering in the air. Nichiren explains that this tower is a metaphor for the magnitude of the human potential—the grandeur of the Buddha nature within all people (see “On the Treasure Tower,” WND-1, 299). Next, the sutra describes the Ceremony in the Air—a vast assembly of Buddhas, bodhisattvas and beings of every description, gathering from all corners of the cosmos. The Buddha employs special powers to raise the entire assembly into the air before the treasure tower. He then begins preaching his teaching.

Nichiren chose to depict on the Gohonzon, in written form, key elements of this Ceremony in the Air. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, representing the treasure tower, is inscribed down the center of the Gohonzon. Rather than a painted or sculpted image, which could not sufficiently capture the totality of a Buddha, Nichiren employed written characters on the Gohonzon to communicate the state of oneness with the Mystic Law that he realized in his own life. According to President Ikeda: “Such [a statue or image] could never fully express Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the fundamental Law that includes all causes (practices) and effects (virtues). The invisible attribute of the heart or mind, however, can be expressed in words” (June 2003 *Living Buddhism*, p. 34).

President Ikeda also emphasizes: “Through our daily practice of reciting the sutra and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can join the eternal Ceremony in the Air here and now. We can cause the treasure tower to shine within us and to shine within our daily activities and lives. That is the wonder of the Gohonzon. A magnificent cosmos of life opens to us, and reality becomes a world of value creation” (June 2003 *Living Buddhism*, p. 32).

The Gohonzon Exists in Faith

While most can agree that everyone possesses a wonderful potential within, truly believing this about all people and living based on this belief is not easy. Nichiren Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon so that anyone can believe in and activate his or her Buddha nature. Just having the Gohonzon, however, will not ensure this. Both faith and practice are essential to unlocking our powerful Buddha nature. Nichiren says: “This Gohonzon also is found only in the two characters for faith. This is what the sutra means when it states that one can ‘gain entrance through faith alone’ . . . What is most important is that, by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo alone, you can attain Buddhahood. It will no doubt depend on the strength of your faith. To have faith is the basis of Buddhism” (“The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon,” WND-1, 832).

The Banner of Propagation

Nichiren Daishonin also says, “I was the first to reveal as the banner of propagation of the Lotus Sutra this great mandala” (“The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon,” WND-1, 831).

Today, the SGI, through the leadership of its three founding presidents—Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, Josei Toda and Daisaku Ikeda—has embraced the Gohonzon as Nichiren truly intended—as a “banner of propagation” of the Buddhist teaching that can lead humankind to peace and happiness. For that reason, members who chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon and exert themselves in SGI activities to spread the Law in the spirit of the three presidents achieve remarkable growth, benefit and victory in their lives.