

“How Those Initially Aspiring to the Way Can Attain Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra”

The Vibrant Chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Is the Driving Force for Limitless Progress—Everything Starts With Our Own Inner Transformation

Excerpts from *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin: The Teachings for Victory*

When we revere Myoho-renge-kyo inherent in our own life as the object of devotion, the Buddha nature within us is summoned forth and manifested by our chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. This is what is meant by “Buddha.” To illustrate, when a caged bird sings, birds who are flying in the sky are thereby summoned and gather around, and when the birds flying in the sky gather around, the bird in the cage strives to get out. When with our mouths we chant the Mystic Law, our Buddha nature, being summoned, will invariably emerge. The Buddha nature of Brahma and Shakra, being called, will protect us, and the Buddha nature of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, being summoned, will rejoice. This is what the Buddha meant when he said, “If one can uphold it [the Mystic Law] even for a short while I will surely rejoice and so will the other Buddhas.”¹ (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 887)

Establishing a State of Indestructible Happiness

Here, Nichiren Daishonin describes the great benefits of chanting Nam-myoho- renge-kyo, the single sound with which we can summon forth the Buddha nature of all living beings.

He begins by speaking of revering “Myoho-renge-kyo inherent in our own life as the object of devotion” (WND-1, 887). The Daishonin revealed the Mystic Law inherent in his own life and manifested it in the concrete form of the Gohonzon, the object of devotion or fundamental respect. Only when our chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is based on faith in the Gohonzon does it become a practice for attaining Buddhahood.

We revere the Gohonzon bestowed on humanity by Nichiren, taking it as a mirror and guide for our life, and believe that we possess and can manifest within us the same supremely noble state of life as the Daishonin. By doing so, we are revering “Myoho-renge-kyo inherent in our own life as the object of devotion” (WND-1, 887).

The Daishonin—embodying the three virtues of sovereign, teacher and parent²— strove with boundless compassion in a dark and evil age to protect and teach people, and help them reveal their highest potential. The way for us to show true reverence and respect for the Gohonzon is to venerate the Daishonin as our fundamental mentor or teacher in faith, learn from his selfless dedication, and carry on his efforts for the happiness and welfare of all people.

In other words, to revere the Gohonzon essentially means that, no matter how troubled the times, we strive to make our mentor’s spirit our own, take personal action for kosen-rufu, and become a source of hope, courage and peace of mind for others.

We are not truly revering “Myoho-renge-kyo inherent in our own life as the object of devotion” (WND-1, 887) if we seek the assistance of, or put our faith in, some supernatural being or Buddha outside of our own lives to attain salvation—for example, like one of

the Buddhas taught in the provisional, pre-Lotus Sutra teachings,³ as is the case in the Nembutsu faith.

In “The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon,” Nichiren 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”(WND-1, 832). When the Daishonin embodied his own Buddhahood, “the soul of Nichiren” (“Reply to Kyo’o,” WND-1, 412), in the form of the mandala that is the Gohonzon, his purpose was to enable each of us to reveal the Gohonzon that exists within us. The Gohonzon is the clear mirror that enables us to manifest the Gohonzon in our own life.

Chanting with faith in the Gohonzon is the key to manifesting the Gohonzon within us and activating the “Myoho-renge-kyo inherent in our own life” (WND-1, 887). If we were to lose sight of this important point, our Buddhist practice runs the risk of lapsing into the subservient worship of some absolute being outside of us.

My mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, often said: “You yourself are Nam-myoho-renge-kyo”; and “How can a Buddha be defeated by illness or economic hardship?” Once we awaken to our enormous potential, we can face any adversity. The purpose of faith in Nichiren Buddhism is to develop such inner strength.

Out of a spirit of profound compassion, Mr. Toda often gave strict guidance to members who lacked conviction in faith and displayed a resigned or defeatist attitude. When those same members later came back to share with him their experiences of overcoming difficulties and achieving victory in their lives, he would smile happily and rejoice together with them on their success. He constantly urged people to awaken to their greater self and to reveal their true potential.

The purpose of our Buddhist practice is for each of us to bring forth the “Myoho-renge-kyo inherent in our own life” (WND-1, 887) and establish an inner state of everlasting and indestructible happiness.

When We Chant, Our Life Communes With the Universe

In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin writes: “When we revere Myohorenge-kyo inherent in our own life as the object of devotion [Gohonzon], the Buddha nature within us is summoned forth and manifested by our chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. This is what is meant by ‘Buddha’” (WND-1, 887).

He then proceeds to explain the process by which this great life state of Buddhahood manifests, employing the very accessible metaphor of a bird in a cage: “When a caged bird sings, birds who are flying in the sky are thereby summoned and gather around, and when the birds flying in the sky gather around, the bird in the cage strives to get out” (WND-1, 887).

The “bird in the cage” represents the Buddha nature of us ordinary people. The cage represents a state of being shackled by fundamental darkness or ignorance, various deluded impulses or earthly desires, and all kinds of suffering. The “caged bird sings” refers to ordinary people rousing faith in the Mystic Law and chanting Nam-myohorenge-kyo. The “birds who are flying in the sky,” meanwhile, represent the Buddha nature of all living beings. We call forth our Buddha nature—that is, the Myohorenge-kyo within us—by chanting with our own voices.

At the same time, however, the sound of our chanting in fact also calls forth the Buddha nature of diverse living beings. This is because—as we saw in the earlier passage—Myohorenge-kyo is also the name of the Buddha nature of all Buddhas, bodhisattvas and other living beings in the Ten Worlds. Once we chant the Mystic Law, therefore, its power is such that it can call forth the Buddha nature of all of them. In other words, our voice chanting Nam-myohorenge-kyo is the powerful sound that awakens and summons forth the Buddha nature of all living beings throughout the universe.

When the birds flying in the sky are called forth by the bird in the cage and gather around it, the bird in the cage tries to get out, says the Daishonin. The moment when the cage of ignorance and suffering disappears, we are liberated from all shackles of illusion, and can soar freely in “the sky of the essential nature of phenomena”⁴ (“On the Large Carriages Drawn by White Oxen,” WND-2, 976)—that is, the realm of enlightenment as vast and unimpeded as the heavens.

Earnest prayer in the form of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo resonates with the Mystic Law that pervades the universe, envelops one’s own life and brings forth the power to break through one’s own inner darkness or ignorance. In other words, the act of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is a drama of profound communion or interaction between ourselves and the universe.

(February 2012 *Living Buddhism*, pp. 25–28)

Notes

1. *The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*, p. 220.
2. Three virtues of sovereign, teacher and parent: Three benevolent functions that a Buddha is said to possess. The virtue of the sovereign is the power to protect all living beings, the virtue of the teacher is the wisdom to instruct and lead them to enlightenment, and the virtue of the parent is the compassion to nurture and support them.
3. The provisional teachings that precede the Lotus Sutra do not teach that the world of Buddhahood exists in all people, and instead describe Buddhas as idealized and superior beings. The Pure Land (Nembutsu) teachings, for example, explain that instead of relying on one’s own efforts, one should exclusively depend on salvation through such a Buddha—namely, Amida.
4. “The sky of the essential nature of phenomena”: Refers to the fundamental nature of enlightenment. Also, Dharma nature. The unchanging nature inherent in all things and phenomena. It is identified with the fundamental Law itself, the essence of the Buddha’s enlightenment, or ultimate truth.

“The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon”

Tapping the Infinite Benefit of the Gohonzon Through Faith

Excerpts from *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin:
The Teachings for Victory*

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 body is the palace of the ninth consciousness,¹ the unchanging reality that reigns over all of life’s functions. To be endowed with the Ten Worlds means that all ten, without a single exception, exist in one world. Because of this it is called a mandala. Mandala is a Sanskrit word that is translated as “perfectly endowed” or “a cluster of blessings.” This Gohonzon also is found only in the two characters for faith.² This is what the sutra means when it states that one can “gain entrance through faith alone.”³ (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 832)

The Gohonzon Exists Within Us

Nichinyo must have been extremely moved to learn that the Gohonzon she received from Nichiren Daishonin is the Gohonzon