

The Language of the Heart

**AN INTRODUCTION TO
NICHIREN DAISHONIN'S
TRUE BUDDHISM**

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**THE LANGUAGE
OF THE HEART**

FOREWORD

I want to express my deepest gratitude to those people who inspired me to put this work together. They are the people who asked me time and again to recommend a book about the Buddhism I practice, and that simply explains what Buddhism is all about. This is an attempt to do that. I have tried within these pages to explain the basic principles of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism to someone who knows nothing or very little about Buddhism. It is only an attempt, because while the Buddhist practice is easy, Buddhist concepts are profound and broad, and difficult to explain and simplify. This little book is an overview. It only skims the surface of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

Though I have practiced true Buddhism for more than 35 years, and notwithstanding Nichiren Daishonin's words, "teach others to the best of your ability," I do not feel that I am a qualified authority on Buddhism. I have therefore primarily relied on the words of Nichiren Shoshu Shoshin-kai priest Reverend Raido Hirota to form the basis of this little book.

This book is a compilation of Reverend Hirota's lectures and thoughts, as well as a few words from lectures of other Shoshin-kai priests, and a few thoughts and words of my own. I have organized and edited the various Buddhist concepts in a way that I hope make them more accessible and understandable to the non-practitioner and someone new to Buddhism. Still, the concepts may be too rich. In my eagerness to convey this wonderful Buddhism to others, I may have provided too much information for newcomers. Read it slowly, in small doses. Let it find its way to your heart. My wish is that the teachings will touch your heart, as they have mine for these many years, and inspire you to take the first steps towards your own enlightenment.

With heartfelt appreciation I thank Kay Dubitsky for her translation, Patrick Quinn and Art Shapiro for proofreading, Josh Matthews for finding typos, and above all Reverend Raido Hirota for his support, encouragement and tireless endeavor as a teacher of the True Law.

Gassho,¹

Peach Pair Glendenning

Editor

July 25, 2011

¹ Gassho – hands clasped together in veneration or respect.

*I respect everyone deeply,
I do not despise anyone,
not even a little,
or look down on anyone with contempt,
because everyone can have the capacity to
become a Buddha of
Namu-myoho-renge-kyo,
if they believe in
Namu-myoho-renge-kyo,
and practice.*

Bodhisattva Jofukyo²
Lotus Sutra
Chapter 20

² Bodhisattva Jofukyo – Bodhisattva Never Despise.

I

FUNDAMENTALS

What is Buddhism? What is a Buddha? What is the
Buddha's Dharma?

THE PURPOSE OF RELIGION

What is religion?

A religion is something that one relies on to define life and to guide one in life.

The purpose of a religion should be to provide a system of beliefs that eliminates delusion, awakens all people to the true reality of life, and saves all living things. A true religion is one that does not discriminate against anyone, and leads all living things—whether human, plant or animal; whether feeling or non-feeling; whether good or evil—to achieve the highest state of awareness. A true religion is one that affects everyone the same, whether one believes it or not.

BUDDHISM IN GENERAL AND SPECIFIC

Generally speaking, Buddhism is a system of beliefs based on the teachings of a Buddha—an enlightened One. The difference between Buddhism and Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hindu, and the other major religions of the world, is that Buddhism does not believe in God. In addition to their belief in God, Christianity, Islam, Hindu and Judaism also believe that God has existed

forever, and is the creator of everything. Buddhism differs greatly from these religions.

In general, Buddhism teaches that no one created life. That said, there are many different Buddhist sects, and many different Buddhist beliefs. The specific Buddhism under discussion in this text is Nichiren Shoshu. The fundamental belief of the religion of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism is that there is one ultimate Law governing all things. This Law has always existed; the Buddha did not create it. The Buddha is a person – a human being just like you and me – who realized that such a law existed. Thus in Buddhism the Law existed first, and has existed since the infinite past – the Buddha came later.

Another important belief in Buddhism is that there is a reason for everything. To explain this briefly, the emergence—or the coming into existence—of all things, such as human life, animals, plant life, even stars, planets, sky, water, and so on, is a result of a complex series of causes and conditions that occur in time and space. Thus it can be said that Buddhism is the study of life.

THE LAW

Dharma is a Sanskrit word, which means *Ho* in Japanese and “Law” in English. The *Dharma* or Law is the Buddha’s ultimate truth. What is the ultimate truth? It is *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*³, the ultimate Law of life and death throughout the universe. It is called the *Mystic Law*, and it is the center of belief in Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

Namu-myoho-renge-kyo. What does this phrase mean?

Namu means devotion with one’s whole mind and with one’s whole life.

Myo is the mystery and wonder of the life of all people. This concept of *myo* means that even selfish, egotistical people, such as us, who are common mortals, also have Buddha-nature and therefore can realize enlightenment. *Myo* indicates that everything, even insects, plants and dead wood have a soul.

Ho refers to the Law. This Law constitutes all living things on this earth as well as all things throughout the entire universe. To teach the mystery of life is to teach about the Law.

³ Pronounced- Nanmeo – ho – ren – gay – key-o.

Renge is the lotus flower. In the case of most flowers the male stamen and the female pistil pollinate, fertilize, and later, after the blossoms have perished, produce seeds. This is not the case with the lotus plant. The lotus plant is quite unusual in that its flower and seed exist at the same time, as the seed pod is the center part of the blossom. Because the blossom and seed exist at the same time, the lotus flower is used as a metaphor to illustrate a unique and wonderful aspect of the Law, which is that cause and effect are present simultaneously. As human beings we were conceived by two parents, our mothers and fathers. Children exist because a man and women came together. The parents are the cause, the children are the effect. Cause...effect. Cause...effect. Cause...effect. Cause and effect go on and on and on. It continues forever.

Kyō means teaching or sutra. It refers to the Buddha's teaching. It is the Buddha's preaching of the Law. *Kyō* indicates the "pure and far-reaching voice" of the Buddha.

Namu-myoho-enge-kyo is the expression of life's dynamic continuum in one phrase. *Namu-myoho-enge-kyo* is actually life condensed. It can be compared to concentrated orange juice; it is life concentrate. *Namu-myoho-enge-kyo* is our life.

The concepts and teachings inherent in the Law of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* are set forth in the scripture known as the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra was one of Shakyamuni Buddha's last teachings. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is the only religion that teaches about life – what life is. It teaches that life itself is the Law; that the Law is within us, and that the Law is inherent in every living thing. It also teaches that the seed of Buddhahood is the fruit of Buddhahood. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is both the seed and the fruit of Buddhahood. It is both cause and effect.

The Law is above and beyond any god. It is an intangible that cannot be grasped or seen. It is incomparable; there is no other Law like it. There is only *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*, the Mystic Law of cause and effect, works the same in everyone's life whether one believes it or not.

BUDDHA

When the Law and the person merge, and the person embodies the Law—incorporates the Law into his or her life, and his or her behavior demonstrates that he or she is living with full awareness of the Law—this is Buddha. One who understands the Law of *Myoho-renge-*

kyo is a Buddha. Such a person is awakened to the true reality of existence and the ultimate truth of life, and helps others achieve the same realization. A Buddha teaches everyone without discrimination.

BUDDHA-NATURE

Christians believe that man is basically evil, and can only be saved if Jesus enters into one's heart. Buddhism believes that man is basically good because all people have Buddha-nature at the core of their lives.

Yes, you have Buddha-nature within you. Would you believe that a rug has Buddha-nature? Trees have Buddha-nature, so do flowers and grass. Even the gravel in a driveway and the asphalt on a road have Buddha-nature. The birds and bees have Buddha-nature, as do rats and vermin. The air and water have Buddha-nature too. As you've probably surmised, everything has Buddha-nature, even the dead.

What is Buddha-nature? *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is the life of Buddha. It is the seed of Buddhahood contained within all life. It is what gives all life the potential to realize Buddhahood or become enlightened. Since everything has the seed of

Buddhahood, anyone and anything can become enlightened.

There are not different kinds of Buddha-natures; there is only one Buddha-nature. The Buddha-nature is the same in all things.



II

THE LINEAGE OF BUDDHISM

It is generally believed that there is only one Buddha—Shakyamuni Gautama Buddha from India who lived nearly three thousand years ago. That however, is not true. Over the course of eternity throughout the universe there have been an uncountable number of Buddhas. Out of all those Buddhas, only two will be discussed here: Shakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin.

THE LIFE OF SHAKYAMUNI

During the prehistoric ages of this world—before any records were kept and human life was primitive—six ancient Buddhas made their advent to teach and guide people. The world's religions developed from these early Buddhist teachings. The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni of India, was the seventh ancient Buddha on this planet. He was the first Buddha of recorded time. And it is his teachings that are the basis of all Buddhisms today.

Shakyamuni literally means sage of the Shakya tribe. There is much dispute as to when Shakyamuni was born. Some say he lived about twenty-five hundred years ago, while the traditions of China and Japan record Shakyamuni's birth as being on the 8th day of the fourth month in the year 1029 B.C.E., in, what is today, Nepal, and passing away in the middle of the night on the 15th day of the second month in the year 949 B.C.E. He was born as Prince Siddhartha Gautama son of King Shuddhodana of the Shakya tribe.

As a young prince, Siddhartha was surrounded by luxury and grandeur, and was protected from witnessing the misfortunes of others. Despite the care the palace took to protect him, Siddhartha, as a young man, became aware of the poverty beyond the royal gates. The misery he

witnessed was so troubling that it aroused in him an intense desire to understand the cause of human suffering, and the cause of the four sorrows of birth, old age, sickness and death. While still a young man he renounced the secular world—which meant leaving his wife, the beautiful Princess Yasodhara, and child, Rahula, and giving up all rights to his inheritance—to pursue religious life.

He first studied Hinduism and yogic meditation with the Brahmins. Not finding the answers to the troubling dilemma of the human condition, Siddhartha left the Brahmins after a few years to pursue severe ascetic practices such as fasting and self-mortification. He undertook these assiduous practices more vigorously and rigorously than anyone, because his pursuit of the true meaning of life was more earnest than others. But when he realized these practices did not lead to the awakening he so desired, he rejected all of them. He then went and sat under a papal tree (now referred to as the Bodhi tree) where he entered into deep meditation, and in a matter of days realized enlightenment. At this time he would have been between the ages of 29 and 35.

After he had attained enlightenment, Shakyamuni wanted to pass on to everyone what he himself had realized. The status of the persons he instructed did not matter to him. Whether it was a man or a woman, a king

or a pauper, a doctor or a leper, he taught everyone equally. He taught so many teachings over the course of his lifetime to everyone he met, that it is said he taught altogether some eighty thousand teachings. The most significant of his teachings was the Lotus Sutra (Sanskrit: *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*) which he taught in the last eight years of his life. The Lotus Sutra was the crown jewel of his lifetime achievements.

For the ninety days following Shakyamuni's death, from the 8th day of the fourth month to the 15th day of the seventh month, one thousand of the Buddha's most learned disciples were brought together to discuss and compile all of the sutras he had taught over the fifty years of his preaching life. This gathering of scholars and wise men was called the Chamber of the First Council. The Council was organized by Ajatashatru, King of Magadha. That the Council was held in Magadha was not so unusual since it was on Eagle Peak in the Kingdom of Magadha that Shakyamuni Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra. But what is truly extraordinary and miraculous is that King Ajatashatru organized and sponsored it, inasmuch as he had spent the early half of his life as one of Shakyamuni's most vehement adversaries. Ajatashatru obstructed the progress of Buddhism every chance he could. He plotted against the Buddha and caused harm and even death to

some of Shakyamuni's disciples. Not until just prior to the time Shakyamuni began teaching the Lotus Sutra did King Ajatashatru begin to come around and have a change of heart. Still, it took another eight years for him to completely relinquish his evil ways, repent of his sins and surrender his heart to Buddhism. That transformation took place on the 15th day of the second month in the year 949 B.C.E., the last day of Shakyamuni Buddha's life. So it is due to the transformation of this one-time foe of the Buddha that we have the Lotus Sutra today.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Many people who are not familiar with Buddhism have heard of the four noble truths. The concept of the four noble truths and the eightfold path was taught by Shakyamuni not long after his enlightenment. These concepts are a part of the Hinayana⁴ sutras.

The four noble truths are: 1) all existence is suffering; 2) suffering is caused by desire; 3) eliminating desire eradicates suffering and brings about emancipation; 4) eradication of desire can be achieved by the eightfold

⁴ Hinayana – Theravada Buddhism (Lesser Vehicle) primarily concerned with self-salvation and elimination of desires.

path. The eightfold path is: right views, right thinking, right speech, right action, right way of life, right endeavor, right mindfulness and right meditation.

In the first three weeks after his enlightenment Shakyamuni taught the *The Flower Garland Sutra*⁵. In this sutra he spoke about the mysteries of life: the interrelatedness of all things. These teachings were so esoteric no one could understand them. Because Shakyamuni at first taught the *Flower Garland Sutra*—teachings that were obscure and unfathomable—it was as if his audience was blind and deaf. They could neither see nor hear the teachings. His words meant nothing to them. Yet, because the teachings were so impressive and scholarly they were like a bauble, a sparkly thing that captured people’s attention, and gave people a sense of the greatness of Buddhism. Once Shakyamuni had attracted an audience, he began to teach on the lowest level—the place where the people of that ancient time were at. These were the Hinayana teachings, such as the four noble truths and the eightfold path. With these teachings he began to slowly cultivate the people’s minds so that they could gradually understand deeper concepts.

⁵ The Flower Garland Sutra – (Skt) *Avatamasaka Sutra*. (Jp) *Kegon Sutra*.

The Hinayana sutras were similar to thoughts, philosophies and ideas the people already knew, and could therefore easily understand. In these sutras Shakyamuni laid out very specific and direct causes and effects and punishments: If you did this, such and such would happen. If you did that, you would have such and such effect. Shakyamuni taught the people as though they were children, telling them to have right thinking, right actions, etc. Just as parents teach their children right and wrong, he told the people not to cheat, not to steal, not to lie, not to do bad things. This was something anyone could understand, even those who did not have knowledge or deep comprehension. During the Hinayana period people thought that Buddhism was nothing more than moral values. But not everyone could be saved by these teachings. Gradually, in time, and as the people's capacity to understand increased, Shakyamuni moved on to higher teachings. The Buddha was determined to save everyone, even those who committed crimes. The earlier teachings did not grant this. They did not offer salvation to all – to the learned, to women, to evil people, to insentient beings. The Lotus Sutra is the only teaching in which Shakyamuni promised that everyone could be saved. It took Shakyamuni more than forty years to prepare the people of his time for the teachings that would save all mankind.

It was not until the last eight years of his life that he finally taught the Lotus Sutra.

Particularly in the Western world, people tend to think that there is only one Buddhism. But because the Buddha taught differently depending on the audience, on the circumstances of the people he was addressing, and on the time period in which he was teaching, there are various teachings and various levels of teachings. For example, Zen Buddhism, which relies on wordless transmission of concepts from mind to mind and not on doctrinal study, is completely different from the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra was taught at the end of the Buddha's life. It was only at the end of his life that Shakyamuni was able to teach the teaching that he had in truth wanted to teach at the very beginning. In the Lotus Sutra he explains his own enlightenment, and the way for all living beings to realize enlightenment. So to be clear, the four noble truths, the eightfold path, and meditation on the "void" do not lead to enlightenment. Such teachings were early teachings of Shakyamuni, intended to cultivate, discipline, awe inspire, and prepare people for the highest teachings.

LOTUS SUTRA

All of Shakyamuni's teachings over the course of his entire lifetime are united in the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra is the reason for his advent in this world. In chapter 2 of this august work Shakyamuni announced, "The World-Honored One⁶ has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth."⁷ In the 11th chapter the Buddha declared, "Since I attained the enlightenment of the Buddha, I have expounded many sutras in innumerable worlds. This sutra is the most excellent. To keep this sutra is to keep me."⁸ And in chapter 23 he proclaimed, "Just as the sea is larger than the rivers, this *Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law* is more profound than any of the other sutras expounded by Buddhas. . . . Just as the Buddha is the king of the Law, this sutra is the king of all sutras. . . . This sutra saves all living beings."⁹

Among the principles illuminated in the Lotus Sutra are:

⁶ World Honored One – an honorific title of the Buddha

⁷ *The Lotus Sutra*, Translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 26

⁸ *The Lotus Sutra*, Translated by Senchu Murano, Nichiren Shu Headquarters, Tokyo, pp. 175-176

⁹ *Idem*, pp. 277

- The true reality of all existence is that all life contains the life of Buddha, therefore all life is equal.
- The one great reason for all Buddhas to appear in the world is to open the wisdom of the Buddha for all living things, to show the Buddha wisdom to all living things, to cause living beings to be enlightened, and to encourage all living beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom.
- All people regardless of gender or status or condition of life, can realize Buddhahood through faith in the Lotus Sutra
- The existence of Buddha is eternal, the Buddhist Laws of truth are never-ending, and all people possess eternal life.

The Lotus Sutra also predicts that a votary would come along during the 500 year period following the second millennium after the death of Shakyamuni and reveal the true teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

THE TRUE BUDDHA

The Eternal Buddha made his appearance about 2200 years after Shakyamuni Buddha's passing. He was born in a fishing village in Chiba Prefecture on the east coast of Japan on the 16th day of the second month in the year 1222, and was named Zennichimaro. (Later he would be known as Nichiren Daishonin.) Unlike Shakyamuni Buddha who was born a prince in a royal family, Zennichimaro was born of poor lineage, and openly spoke of it. "In this life," he said, "I was born in poverty of humble parentage; I grew up in the house of a *candala*." In the Indian caste system the *candala* is the meanest or lowest class. This class consists of fishermen, jailers, slaughterers and followers of other "unclean" trades. Yet, despite having been born into such mean circumstances, Zennichimaro's parents saw to it that he was granted an education.

Between the ages of 12 and 16 Zennichimaro attended Seichō-ji, a temple school on Mount Kiyosumi, near his home. Initially he studied the fundamentals of Buddhism, and received a general education. He was exceptionally mature and precocious for his age, for as early as age 12 he began to pray for wisdom. He was also troubled by the magnitude of the people's suffering, and

wanted to understand why it was so, and how it could be eliminated. Remarkably in those early years he had a great realization, perceiving truths about the essence of life. But that didn't satisfy him. He knew that he would need to support his realizations with theory and documentary proof; and that would require extensive study.

At age 16, Zennichimaro shaved his head and took his vows as a priest. At his ordination he changed his name to Zeshō-bō Renchō which held a more profound meaning for him. (*Zeshō* means sacred person under the sun; *Renchō* means lotus growth or sprouting from a lotus). Soon after, he left Mount Kiyosumi in pursuit of knowledge to support his realizations. He traveled to Kamakura, Kyoto and Nara. These were Japan's three great learning centers of the 13th-century. At these centers Zeshō-bō Renchō endeavored to study and practice the Great Vehicle, Mahayana Buddhism which was practiced in the countries of northeast Asia, namely India, China, Korea and Japan. In addition, in searching for the teaching that defined and proclaimed the supreme Law he had realized in his youth, he also studied the doctrines of Hinayana Buddhism and other major Buddhist sects, as well as Confucianism.

Renchō was very structured and systematic in his studies. He carefully documented his progress and his

realizations about the teachings of the various sects and their relative merit. One by one he theorized, compared, and refuted them. In the end, he rejected all of the major Buddhist sects of the day, including Shingon, Zen, Jōdo and Ritsu. He found their doctrines and scriptures to be incomplete, borrowed, partial or completely wrong. Having read all of the Buddhist texts, he gradually became convinced that the true religion of Shakyamuni Buddha was contained in the Lotus Sutra. He realized that all teachings of Buddhism could be found united within this one scripture. Thus he embraced the Lotus Sutra exclusively, and championed it as the only teaching containing the truth he had perceived in his youth.

Renchō determined that the Lotus Sutra, with its laws, offered complete salvation and absolute mercy. Its doctrine teaches that all living things may be granted a way of life the same as that of Buddha. He also perceived that the essence of the sutra was contained in its title.

As many know, formal Japanese uses Chinese characters as its alphabet. In Japanese this alphabet is called *kanji*. When Renchō read the Lotus Sutra he was reading the Chinese characters, or *kanji*, but pronouncing them in Japanese. Thus when he read the Chinese title of Lotus Sutra he pronounced it *Myoho-renge-kyo*. Hence *Myoho-renge-kyo* is the Japanese transliteration of the

Chinese title of the Lotus Sutra. This title, he concluded was the essential part of the Lotus Sutra, because, as he realized, it was the supreme Law.

At age 32, after sixteen long years of intense study, and armed with the absolute certainty of the Lotus Sutra's veracity, Renchō returned to Seichō-ji temple, where he sought to officially announce his findings. To prepare his presentation he secluded himself within the temple grounds. No one, not his colleagues, teachers, or family, had any idea of what he was about to do, which was to turn Buddhism on its head.

On the 28th day of the fourth month in the year 1253 Zeshō-bō Renchō left his sanctum at Seichō-ji just before dawn and climbed to the hilltop in the Kasagamori forest. As he reached the summit the sun's rays appeared on the horizon. To coincide with the sunrise he raised his voice and spoke "*Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*" in salutation. That was, then and there, mankind's first invocation of the supreme Law. The true practice of Buddhism for this age had now been proclaimed.

In later years, Nichiren Daishonin would explain the significance of this phrase in his writing, "The One Essential Phrase":

...The Lotus Sutra defines our life as the Buddha's life, our mind as the Buddha's wisdom and our actions

*as the Buddha's behavior....Namu-myoho-renge-kyo is only one phrase but it contains the essence of the entire sutra....Everything has its essential point, and the heart of the Lotus Sutra is its title, Namu-myoho-renge-kyo. Truly, if you chant this in the morning and evening, you are correctly reading the entire Lotus Sutra.... A Law this easy to embrace and this easy to practice was taught for the sake of all mankind in this evil age of the Latter Day of the Law.*¹⁰

Renchō returned to the grounds of Seichōji temple to disclose to his peers, his family, and local town folk what he had learned during his years of dedicated study. As he stood before his audience, one might imagine him pressing his palms together reverentially as he uttered with full resolve, “*Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*” for other human ears to hear for the first time. After invoking the Law, he lectured on his findings and realizations, and pointed out the errors in the teachings of the other major Buddhist sects. When he concluded his discussion he announced that he was changing his name to “Nichiren.” The significance of the name “Nichiren” – meaning sun-lotus – suggests that Nichiren attained enlightenment by himself.

Negative passions were aroused by the speech. The audience was up in arms. They thought Nichiren’s ideas were radical. How could someone, who was no more than

¹⁰ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. One, pp. 221-222.

an itinerant priest at best, disparage their beliefs and advocate belief in ideas they had never heard before? It was outrageous. All at once, at what was expected to be a tranquil and celebratory occasion, chaos ensued.

Nichiren's parents must have sensed the tension rising in the air, and feared for their son's life. The local lord of the district, Tojō Kagenobu, was roiling with anger. As a devout believer of one of the other Buddhist sects, Kagenobu decided Nichiren was a dangerous threat that had to be dealt with immediately. He summoned his samurai and devised a plot to kill him.

Dozenbō was a senior priest at Seichōji and Nichiren's former teacher. He was also an ardent believer in one of the Buddhist sects Nichiren had refuted in his lecture. Feeling the anger mounting against his former student, Dozenbō, as a cleric of one of the other sects, could have very readily joined the angry crowd in plotting against Nichiren, had Nichiren not been one of his favorite students with such bright prospects. Instead, Dozenbō took pity on him. In an act of mercy, he hastily summoned two junior priests and organized a plan of escape. The two priests rushed into action, escorting Nichiren through a secret passage that led into the woods, and allowed him to get away.

It was twilight as Nichiren ran for his life along a foot path in the woods. Only a few hours earlier he had proclaimed the true Buddhism for the modern age that would save all mankind. How ironic!

This was the beginning of Nichiren Daishonin's turbulent life as the votary of the Lotus Sutra. The circumstances and events of his life fulfilled the prophecies of the Lotus Sutra. Twenty-two years later, following two exiles, a foiled execution, and numerous attempts on his life, the Daishonin would write:

It would be easier to walk naked in a raging fire, easier to take up Mt. Sumeru in one's hands and toss it away, easier to hoist a great stone on one's back and walk across the ocean than to do what I have done. To establish the True Law in this country of Japan is indeed a difficult thing.¹¹

Nichiren Daishonin passed away peacefully at the age of 61 on the 13th day of the 10th month in the year 1282. During his lifetime he revealed the direct path to enlightenment that has, since the infinite past, lead all Buddhas to enlightenment; and he provided the true teachings, the true object of worship, and a concise practice to achieve that enlightenment. None of this was accomplished by Shakyamuni Buddha. On the day that Shakyamuni died, he issued a warning: "Follow the Law,

¹¹ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Volume 3, "On the Selection of the Time," *Gosho Zenshu*, p. 256

not the person.” However, Shakyamuni himself did not identify the Law which he had realized and been enlightened by. Instead, he described it, praised it and alluded to it in the Lotus Sutra. His life’s purpose was to teach the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren Daishonin’s life’s purpose was to unlock the secrets in the depths of the Lotus Sutra, identify and establish the universal Law, and provide a simple and direct means for all living things to realize enlightenment. That is why Nichiren Daishonin is considered the true Buddha. Even so, the warning that Shakyamuni Buddha issued on his deathbed, to “Follow the Law, not the person,” remains the guiding principle in Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. It is through the Law that one becomes enlightened. Thus the Law is supreme, not the Buddha. The Law is worshipped, not the person.



III

NICHIREN SHOSHU

Nichiren Shoshu means Nichiren's true teachings, or the true teachings of Nichiren. Nichiren Shoshu is a Japanese Buddhism. It is a religion dedicated to teaching the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin.

Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism believes in the absolute equality of all life—that all things possess Buddha-nature. The objective of this Buddhism is the enlightenment of all living things.

THE TEACHINGS OF NICHIREN SHOSHU

The basic teachings of Nichiren Shoshu are represented in the doctrine of the Three Great Secret Laws. The Three Great Secret Laws are the only precepts of the religion. They are: 1) the object of worship of the Eternal Buddha, 2) the sanctuary of the Eternal Buddha and, 3) the invocation of the Eternal Buddha.

The Gohonzon is the object of worship. *Honzon* is a Japanese word that means object of respect, and *Go* is an honorific title. The Gohonzon is a mandala that allows one to view one's mind and see all the various states of being within, including the condition of Buddha. The Gohonzon is a physical representation of the Law.

The sanctuary is the place where the Gohonzon is enshrined. It is an area removed from evil.

The invocation is *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* intoned by believers.

It is the study and practice of these three basic ideals which form the essence of the Buddhism of Nichiren Shoshu.

To explain these a little further, the Gohonzon of the Eternal Buddha represents the soul of Buddha. According to the teachings of Buddhism, it is by chanting

Namu-myoho-renge-kyo to Gohonzon in the sanctuary that one can open the wisdom of Buddha and perceive eternal life. Through this simple practice one can experience an inner peace and tranquility in daily life.

However, the invocation of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* in Nichiren Shoshu is a form of chanting which is performed not only for oneself, it is also for leading others to enlightenment. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* must be chanted for others, for society and for the sake of righteousness. It is only by believing in the Three Great Secret Laws and their study and practice, that one can gain the same heart as the true Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin.

THE PRACTICE

The practice of Nichiren Shoshu is the recitation of the title and two chapters (2nd and 16th) of the Lotus Sutra. The basis for this can be found in Nichiren Daishonin's writings. He wrote, "Among the entire twenty-eight chapters, the *Hoben* [2nd] and *Juryo* [16th] chapters are particularly outstanding. The remaining are all in a sense the branches and leaves of these two chapters. Therefore I

recommend that you practice reading the prose sections of the *Hoben* and *Juryo* chapters.”¹²

To recite these two chapters from the Lotus Sutra in the morning and evening is considered the secondary practice. To chant and protect the title of the Lotus Sutra, *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*, is the essential and primary practice.

The reason for having faith and practicing this Buddhism is to realize that the Buddha’s life is within. True value in life comes from seeking enlightenment. The purpose of life is to realize the Buddha-nature within, and to make *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* the basis of every life activity. Striving to have *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* in the heart and the mind, and trying to achieve a life that is appropriate for the condition of Buddha that is within each human being is the true Way of the practitioners of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

¹² *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Vol. Six, pp.10*, Nichiren Shoshu International Center, “The Recitation of the *Hoben* and *Juryo* Chapters of the Lotus Sutra.”

WHY WE CHANT RATHER THAN MEDITATE

1. In meditation only the individual who meditates benefits. This Buddhism is not only for the individual's enlightenment, it is for the enlightenment of all mankind and all other life forms. The only way non-human forms of life can become enlightened is by being exposed to the chanting of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* – hearing it, so to speak, by osmosis. When human beings chant they sow the seed of Buddhahood in all the various objects in their environment.
2. One chants so that other human beings can hear it and thus receive the seed of Buddhahood.
3. The Buddha-nature in all life throughout the universe is summoned when one chants.
4. Chanting is unifying. One can chant with people of any nation because they are chanting in the Buddha's language and not in the language of any one country. When two or more people chant together there is harmony at that moment—world peace is achieved at that moment in that environment.

5. In meditation one closes one's eyes and tries to control one's thoughts in an effort to separate oneself from the outside world. By contrast, in true Buddhism all the senses are engaged in the practice, because enlightenment exists in all conditions of life.
 - a. **Seeing.** The eyes are open to see the Gohonzon (which represents Buddha) and the altar ("sanctuary"). This is also an expression of seeing clearly.
 - b. **Hearing.** The ears hear the chanting, which is enlightenment itself and the ringing of the bell is the music offered to the Buddha
 - c. **Smelling.** The nose smells the fragrant incense which is offered to purify the environment for the Buddha
 - d. **Tasting.** Fruit is placed on the altar as an offering of food to the Buddha
 - e. **Touching.** The prayer beads represent the body of the Buddha and the body of human beings which are held in our hands. This signifies that Buddha exists within our human bodies.
 - f. **Thinking.** From our scattered thoughts arise the pure mind of Buddhahood.

ODAIMOKU

Daimoku is a Japanese word meaning the title of a sutra. In Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism “O,” an honorific prefix, is added to the word to create the term *Odaimoku* which means the sacred invocation or chanting of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*, the title of the Lotus Sutra. The essence of the entire sutra is contained in its title. Therefore, chanting *Odaimoku* is equivalent to chanting the entire sutra. The chanting of *Odaimoku* is the primary practice, for *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is the Mystic Law and the Buddha-nature.

Namu is derived from Sanskrit, meaning devotion or dedication with one’s whole life. *Myo* means mystic. *Ho* means Law. *Ren* means cause; *Ge* means effect. *Kyo* means teaching or sutra. Simply speaking this phrase means devotion with one’s whole life to the teaching of the mystic Law of cause and effect.

Since *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is both the seed and the fruit of Buddhahood, Nichiren Daishonin wrote, “When with our mouths we chant the Mystic Law, our Buddha-nature, being summoned, will invariably emerge.”¹³ This means that if one chants *Namu-myoho-*

¹³ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. Six, p. 208, Nichiren Shoshu International Center, Tokyo, “How Those

renge-kyo only one time, one is guaranteed enlightenment because the cause has been made that at once sets into motion the realization of Buddhahood at some point, now or in the future.

GONGYO

Gongyo is a conversation between oneself and the Buddha. It is the recitation of the 2nd and 16th chapters of the Lotus Sutra. This is the liturgy of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

Shakyamuni's Lotus Sutra has 28 chapters. So why do we recite only the 2nd and the 16th chapters and no other? The Lotus Sutra is divided in two significant parts. The first 14 chapters contain the theoretical teachings; the second 14 chapters contain the essential or true teachings. The most important chapter of the theoretical teachings is chapter two, entitled "Tactfulness" (*Hoben-pon*). This chapter teaches that everything in the universe is equal, no life form is superior to any other life form, and that not only human beings can be saved, but all living things have the same potential to realize enlightenment. It also

Initially Aspiring to the Way can Attain Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra."

explains the only reason why Buddhas appear in the world, which, as mentioned earlier, is to open, show, awaken and cause all living beings to enter the Buddha's wisdom.

Of the essential teachings, it is chapter sixteen, entitled "The Life-span of the Tathagata"¹⁴ (*Juryo-hon*), which is the most important. This chapter explains why all life is equal. It reveals that the state of Buddhahood is eternal; that all states of existence have always existed in infinite Buddhahood, and Buddhahood has always been present in all the infinite states of existence.

One might assume that the language of *Gongyo* is Japanese because it sounds like Japanese, but it is not. Japanese language speakers have as much difficulty understanding *Gongyo* as non-Japanese speakers. That is because the liturgy of Nichiren Shoshu is actually not in one language. It is a compilation of languages, reflecting the path Buddhism took as it traveled from India through Central Asia to China to Japan.

The Lotus Sutra itself was an oral conversation between the Buddha and the people. In India during Shakyamuni Buddha's time, there were many different tribes of people, all speaking their own languages, and all illiterate because systems of writing had not yet been

¹⁴ Tathagata – a Sanskrit word that is an honorific title of the Buddha.

established. The only means of communication was orally. The only means of learning was by sound—by hearing it and by rote. After the Buddha’s passing, the most scholarly disciples came together to discuss and compile the teachings. These monks were from the various tribes of India, and China and other outlying countries. Each one would begin his statement by saying, “Thus I heard,” and then say the sound in his own language or dialect that he heard the Buddha speak. Others may have disagreed and would say, no, “I heard thus,” then in their own language or dialect say what they heard the Buddha speak. The sutra was compiled by sounds and not by words in such a painstaking manner, and was carefully passed down from generation to generation in just such a way.

The Lotus Sutra was completed only after a system of writing had been developed. Monks and priests ultimately came to a consensus on what the Buddha had said and how it should be written. They wrote the sutra to suit the sounds that the Buddha conveyed using phonetics, which they decided was the best way to create proximate sounds. This process of transcribing the sounds—not words—took a thousand years.

It is not known what the first language of the Lotus Sutra was in because there is no record of the original language. Most likely it was written in one of the local

dialects of Central Asia, and later formalized into Sanskrit. Then as early as 255 C.E. the first Chinese translation was made. As the Lotus Sutra was transmitted from country to country words were added, subtracted or compounded by putting a Sanskrit prefix with a Chinese suffix, for example.

The Nichiren Shoshu liturgy recited today—the 2nd and 16th chapters—is derived from a Chinese translation of the Lotus Sutra made in 406 C.E. by Kumarjiva, a Central Asian Buddhist monk and scholar. The liturgy consists of Chinese characters with Japanese pronunciation, which has further been phonetically transcribed into the various languages of the world. Therefore, no matter what the native language of the speaker, the sound of *Gongyo* is virtually the same. Thus the language of *Gongyo* is universal.

In one sense, as has been established above, *Gongyo* and *Odaimoku* are not in one language. But on the other hand they are in one language. They are in the Buddha's language. They are in the language of the heart.

Gongyo must be recited sincerely. When *Gongyo* is recited slowly, or at a reasonable pace, one feels one's own Buddha-nature. One feels the peace of mind and joy of the sutra. It's important that one puts one's heart into *Gongyo*, after all it is a personal conversation between the individual and the Buddha.

Inherent in the rhythm of *Gongyo* is the spirit of all that *Gongyo* is supposed to be. If *Gongyo* is not done at a reasonable pace, pronouncing every word, one cannot feel the Buddha-nature — one just can't.

Centuries ago, when *Gongyo* was first established, there were no metronomes to keep a consistent rhythm. The sound of the rainfall — the consistent tat – tat – tat – tat – tat of the falling rain was used to set the rhythm. It was not the words so much as the rhythm that was learned. Once the rhythm was mastered the sounds came. The sounds were matched to the rhythm. The meanings of the words are not the focus; it is the sound.

Why do we need to do *Gongyo* if the *Odaimoku* is the essence of the entire sutra? Because *Gongyo* is like an instruction manual while the *Odaimoku* (*Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*) is the device, the crucial element, the thing itself. We need the instruction manual to know how to put the device together and how to operate it. We need to be reminded everyday that we have Buddha-nature, and how to behave as a Buddha.

GOHONZON

Gongyo and *Odaimoku* are chanted to a mandala called Gohonzon.

Gohonzon is a piece of rice paper representing the Law. The Law, however, is not the paper. Looking at the front of Gohonzon one sees the *kanji* characters of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. When the Gohonzon is turned over one cannot see the written Law. The Law is neither the front nor the back of Gohonzon; the Law is *Myoho-renge-kyo*. But to see *Myoho-renge-kyo* is difficult. When one looks at a mirror one thinks one is looking at oneself, but it is only an image of one's physical self that one is viewing. We cannot see inside ourselves—our thoughts, or our spiritual aspect. Gohonzon is the mirror of our heart—a window to our soul. We need to see inside our soul. We need a mirror so that we know what we look like in our heart.

Unlike travel on this earth where, if you travel east you will go on until you arrive where you started, in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism if you travel east you will go on forever. Thus Gohonzon represents all physical phenomena and spiritual phenomena in the universe, across the three time periods of past, present and future. These elements are also written on Gohonzon.

Each human life is also included in the universe. The Gohonzon is a small scroll that represents all aspects of life. Down the center of Gohonzon is written the Law of *Myoho-renge-kyo*. It is this Law which governs everything including the protective forces of Buddhism (often referred to as Buddhist gods). Because *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* encompasses everything, including ourselves, we are not searching for Buddha or gods outside ourselves. We must realize that we have Buddha-nature within us, and Buddha-nature is one of the elements that is common to everything.

The most significant aspect of Gohonzon is *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo-Nichiren*, which is written down the center. Everything else that appears on Gohonzon is secondary. The Gohonzon must be handled with the same care one has for oneself.

JIGYO KETA

Jigyo keta is the practice of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism. *Jigyo* means that one seeks enlightenment for oneself by practicing the true Law. *Keta* means one seeks enlightenment for others by teaching them and enlightening them to the true Law.

There is no distinction between oneself and others. Just as fish are inseparable from the water in which they swim, so too is man and his environment inseparable. Man's environment consists of everything around him that is not him, including other people he comes in contact with. Moreover, since man cannot become enlightened in a vacuum—he cannot become enlightened unless his environment also becomes enlightened—it is necessary for man to enlighten his environment for he himself to become enlightened. One person's enlightenment is dependent on the enlightenment of others. Therefore, practicing for others, leading others to enlightenment, is just as important as seeking enlightenment for oneself. *Jigyō* and *keta* are of equal value. There is no greater gift that one can give another than the Law of *Namu-myōhō-rengē-kyō*.

The *keta* practice, that is telling others about *Namu-myōhō-rengē-kyō*, is also known as *shakubuku*. (Further discussion of this concept can be found in the article "Life and Death" within these pages.)



IV

ELEMENTS OF PRACTICE

THE ALTAR

In Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism the altar is the place of practice in one's home or in a temple. As mentioned earlier, it is a place free of evil. It consists of a cabinet, in which the Gohonzon is enshrined, and a table or altar, which is placed in front of the cabinet. On the altar is placed either a single candle on the right side, a vase of green leaves on the left side and an incense burner in the center, or two candles and two vases of greens, one of each placed on either side.

Every element on the altar is an expression of offering to Gohonzon, and a reflection of one's faith. To receive the true benefit of the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, it is important to uphold the traditions of practice as directed. As Daishonin himself explained, "Whether you chant the Buddha's name, recite the sutra or merely offer flowers and incense, all your virtuous acts will implant benefits and good fortune in your life. With this conviction you should put your faith into practice."¹⁵

¹⁵ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. One, Nichiren Shoshu International Center, Tokyo, 1979, "On Attaining Buddhahood," p. 4.

GREEN LEAVES

Evergreens are offered to Gohonzon as they are symbolic of eternal life. The formal name of the evergreens is *shikimi*, and is similar to mountain laurel.

Pretty, colorful flowers express the transient states of vitality and decline. When flowers are in bloom they express beauty, robustness and vigor, the vital aspects of life. When flowers die, they look ugly and have a foul smell—the declining aspect of life—and the foul smell permeates the air, making flowers unsuitable as an offering to Gohonzon. The fleeting beauty of a flower represents impermanence and uncertainty. By contrast, evergreens, being green in all seasons, express the eternity of the Mystic Law (*Myoho*) and the life of all living things. Additionally, the *shikimi*, itself, is both an evergreen and an aromatic tree.

At the time Buddhism was imported to Japan from China by way of Korea the only evergreen in Japan was the aromatic *shikimi*, which was green all year round. Pretty, colorful flowers came to appear in the markets of villages and towns only after Japan opened up to trading with other countries. Therefore, the *shikimi* was offered to Gohonzon because it was available year around, even in the cold season.

CANDLES

Candles represent death. They also symbolize the Buddha's wisdom which illuminates the darkness of the world of death. White candles are used rather than colored candles as they indicate purity.

INCENSE

Incense represents the Middle Way between the worlds of life and death. Thus it represents the reality of the Buddha's life. Because it is an aromatic tree, the *shikimi* is also used as an ingredient in incense sticks. Although *shikimi* withers and dies, its scent remains, which is also an expression of eternal life. Even if the fire in the stick of incense goes out, the scent lingers in the room. This too is an expression of eternal life.

The *shikimi* incense, which is symbolic of the realm of life, is lit with the flame of a candle, symbolic of the realm of death, and burnt in an incense burner. The blending of the realms of life and death represent the

Middle Way.¹⁶ The fragrance of the incense purifies the air in front of the Gohonzon.

Three sticks of incense are usually offered. This symbolizes the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Law and the Priest. However, if one cannot burn three sticks of incense because the smell is too harsh, it is acceptable to burn just one.

WATER

Water is the source of life. Offer a cup of water every morning before breakfast, keeping it uncovered during morning Gongyo and during the rest of the day. Before evening Gongyo, empty the water cup and put the cover back on. If the water cup does not have a cover, turn the cup upside down. The Sanskrit word for water is *arghah*. This is the root from which the Latin word “aqua” was derived. As it is so hot in India, it is the custom to serve water to an honored guest. This is how the custom of offering water to the Buddha arose. Water is the most valuable offering to the Gohonzon, therefore it is

¹⁶ The Middle Way – life is neither existence nor non-existence, the reality of life is that it is both. It is the mystic entity of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* that is the reality of all things.

customary to place it higher than the other elements of the altar.

OTHER OFFERINGS

In "The Gift of Rice"¹⁷ Nichiren Daishonin wrote, "...Life itself is the most precious of all treasures. Even the treasures of the entire universe cannot equal the value of a single human life. Life is like a lamp, and food like oil. When the oil is gone, the flame will die out, and without food, life will cease." Thus in Japan cooked rice and fruit are placed on the altar as an offering to the Buddha. The grain does not have to be rice. It should be whatever the individual eats: oatmeal, toast, granola, etc. A small amount of grain is offered in the morning, and is placed next to the water. It should be removed after morning Gongyo and eaten. Fresh fruit is placed in a bowl, and placed on the altar. It should be eaten before it becomes over-ripe.

The offerings of grains and fruit express the attitude of sustaining the life of the Buddha.

¹⁷ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. One, p.267

BELL

Just as incense represents an offering of fragrance to the Buddha, ringing the bell represents an offering of music. For this reason it should be struck in a way that is aesthetically pleasing to the person who is doing Gongyo.

Traditionally, priests ring the bell as follows: the bell is not rung during the first prayer. For the second prayer, ring the bell seven times before the recitation of the 2nd (*Hoben*) chapter. Ring the bell three times at the end of the 2nd chapter. And ring the bell seven times at the beginning of Odaimoku. Ring the bell five times to conclude Odaimoku.

Lay believers should respect the tradition, but it is not necessary to strike the bell an exact number of times.

PRAYER BEADS

We call the prayer beads *juzu*. The *juzu* represents the Law. The beads are perfectly round. Their roundness symbolizes the mystical cycle of life and the universe. The *juzu* consist of 108 beads of equal size in the body of the *juzu*, which represent 108 sufferings and desires of human existence. The four smaller beads strung within the 108

beads represent the Four Great Bodhisattvas (Jogyo, Muhengyo, Jyogyo, and Anryugyo), signifying the four noble qualities of true self, eternity, purity and happiness, respectively. It was predicted that after the 2000 years following Shakyamuni's passing, the four bodhisattvas would spread the Law of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. That is why Nichren Daishonin is so important. He was the first to introduce the Law and spread it.

The two large beads at each end of the *juzu* indicate the two Buddhas, Taho¹⁸ and Shakyamuni, who represent two parents, as well as the principles of reality (all phenomena) and wisdom (the Law), respectively.

To hold the prayer beads correctly, place the end with two tassels on the middle finger of the left hand, twist the beads once in the middle and place the end with the three tassels on the middle finger of the right hand. Put your palms together and place them in front of your chest. The *juzu* are twisted once so that they don't slip out of your hands. The *juzu* represent the body but their shape was not intended to suggest the shape of the human body. That idea was added later.

¹⁸ Taho – Many Treasures Buddha. He is a Buddha who appears in chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra to lend credence to Shakyamuni's teaching of the Law.

When we put beads on our hands and put our palms together in prayer position, the beads clothe our sufferings and desires. That is the duty of the *juzu*, to envelop our delusions inside our palm. We have worries, anxieties, passions, our minds are constantly troubled, and that is why we carry beads.

The *juzu* are as important as the Gohonzon¹⁹. Don't put them on the floor. Don't play with them as toys. Don't wear them, or use them as ornamentation. Even though we use our hands to hold them and touch them, we must handle them respectfully. If they are broken, even a little, some people may fix them and continue using them, but they should not do that.

If someone were to put the *juzu* in his or her hands, even though he or she did not believe in Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, such a person would have the same potential as a believer to become enlightened. That is because all life is equal.



¹⁹ Gohonzon – the true object of worship representing the universal Law and Buddha-nature in all things, *Namu-myoho-rengo-kyo*.

V

HOLIDAYS

The most important religious holidays in Nichiren Shoshu are *Oeshiki*, *Risshu*, *Okō* and New Years. In addition the national holidays of the country in which believers live are also celebrated. For example, in the United States believers celebrate Thanksgiving or the 4th of July, birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's and Father's Day, etc.

OESHIKI

October 13

Oeshiki is the most important ceremony in Nichiren Shoshu. It is a celebration of the eternal life of Nichiren Daishonin and our own eternal life.

On the 13th day of the 10th month in the 5th year of *Koan* (1282), Nichiren Daishonin's body, which was the same as any human body, passed away at the age of 61. Nevertheless, the Buddha-nature within Daishonin's life and all life—the life of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* itself—did not die. It never dies; it is eternal. That is why we celebrate Oeshiki: to affirm the eternal life of the Buddha.

At the time the Daishonin passed away, the 13th day of the 10th month, according to the lunar calendar, would have actually fallen at the end of November rather than in October. It would have been late fall or even wintery then. Yet, throughout Japan the cherry blossoms bloomed. So for Oeshiki paper cherry blossoms are made and placed on either side of Gohonzon.

Oeshiki is a festive day. Believers gather together on October 13th for a great celebration to honor the occasion. It is a day when gifts are exchanged, special foods are prepared, and Buddhism is discussed. Oeshiki is as important to Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism as Christmas

is to Christianity. The intent of the Oeshiki holiday is to celebrate the eternal Buddha-nature, and remind us that it is ever-present.

OKO

13th of Every Month

Because Nichiren Daishonin passed away on the 13th day of the month, we express our appreciation to Daishonin with the *Okō* ceremony on the 13th day of every month to remind us that the eternal Buddha is always present.

RISSHU

April 28

The 28th day of the 4th month in the year 1253, Nichiren Daishonin first proclaimed *Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō* as the true teaching for all mankind. This day is celebrated because it is the birthday of *Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō*.

NEW YEAR'S DAY

January 1

Nichiren Daishonin wrote, "New Year's Day marks the first day, the first month, the beginning of the year and the start of spring. A person who celebrates this day will gain virtue and be loved by all, just as the moon becomes full gradually, moving from west to east, and the sun shines more brightly traveling from east to west."²⁰ This day is celebrated because it represents the eternal cycle of renewal.



²⁰ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. One, pp.279, Nichiren Shoshu International Center, Tokyo. 1979, "The New Year's Goshō."

VI

OTHER CONCEPTS AND THOUGHTS FROM REVEREND RAIDO HIROTA

How is the practice of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism applied and experienced in daily life?

ENLIGHTENMENT

You may think that the condition or state of Buddhahood does not enter into your mind, and that it is unrealistic to think that you can experience Buddha in your life. That is not at all the case. Deep, deep joy is a very real feeling that you may have experienced. But the feeling of Buddhahood is unlikely to happen out of nowhere. Most likely it will not happen while one is eating or having tea, for example. And it is less likely to happen when one is suddenly feeling happy. But when I chant in front of Gohonzon, sometimes I am overcome with a feeling of appreciation coming from deep within myself. I would say that feeling is probably the nature of Buddha, or the closest to enlightenment that I have experienced.

Buddhahood is not a concrete thing, nor something that everyone experiences in exactly the same way. It is difficult to describe what enlightenment is as a reality, because it is different for each person. Your experience will depend on who you are and what the situation is. The life condition of Buddha can come in all kinds of forms, all kinds of feelings, all kinds of realizations. When you find some kind of standard you can rely on, then you might be able to judge when you are experiencing the life of Buddha, or what the life condition of Buddha should be.

Enlightenment does not have a fixed form. It cannot be explained as a discrete entity. Nichiren Daishonin explains it like this in his writing “The Three Kinds of Treasure,” “More valuable than treasures in the storehouse are treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all. From the time you read this letter on, strive to accumulate the treasures of the heart.”²¹ Treasures of the storehouse are money, jewels, property. Treasures of the body are education, social status, and attractive appearance. Treasures of the heart are when you recognize that you have the Buddha-nature of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* within you. Even if it is for only one second that you have this feeling or realization, that is enlightenment.

LIFE AND DEATH

When we human beings look at life and death they seem different. But from the point of view of Nichiren Daishonin life and death are the same condition; there is no difference between the two. If you look at the eyes of a human being before and after death you notice a

²¹ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. Two, p. 279.

difference; that a change has taken place—a change from life to death. With the human body there is a definite difference between life and death. But the essence of life never changes, not even in death. It is constant. It is always the same. In death there is life, and in life there is death (dead skin on our bodies, fingernails, hair). The spirit, however, never dies; even in death the spirit is alive. And of course, in life it is alive.

The human body can be compared to a bottle of water. The form is there and the content is there. If the body dies it would be as if the bottle fell over and the water spilled out. This water is never going to return to the way it was. Water is water. It runs down mountains to the ocean, evaporates and becomes gas, condenses and becomes rain or snow on the mountain, then flows back down to the ocean. It's a cycle. The property of water—H₂O—never changes. But never again will it be the same water—the same river, the same ocean. The essence of water is *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. When water changes form its essence stays the same. The same is true of human beings. Humans change form, but their essence never changes. It will always be *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*.

The sutras expounded before the Lotus Sutra addressed only the life of human beings. With the Lotus Sutra came the teaching that humans cannot exist without

the environment. Humans live within air, water, earth, and light. Humans exist within the environment of these four elements. Without these four elements and without other forms of life humans could not exist. The Lotus Sutra shows us that other things are essential for our existence. Without these others things we would not exist. We connect with the environment, that is why we are living at this moment. So when you talk about the enlightenment of human beings you must include the environment in that enlightenment. Everything in the entire universe must be included in your enlightenment.

Let's take fish for example, people eat fish. Once eaten, the fish is no longer a fish; it becomes a part of a human being. Man cannot become enlightened if the fish does not become enlightened. When a person breaths in air, the air becomes a part of that person. The air has to become enlightened if man is to become enlightened. Are we humans so superior that we can live without air?

In Buddhism there is a principle called *ichinen sanzen*.²² When I am the "single life entity" (*ichinen*) everyone else, as well as the environment, are "all phenomena" or everything (*sanzen*). When someone else is

²² *Ichinen Sanzen* – a single life moment contains three thousand realms of existence, or more simply *ichinen* equals a single life and *sanzen* equals everything.

the “single life entity” (*ichinen*), I and everyone else, including the environment, are “all phenomena” (*sanzen*). Life alternates between *ichinen* and *sanzen* (the single life entity and all phenomena). The Lotus Sutra is the first scripture to reveal this concept. Each one of us is a little piece of the whole fabric of life. If it weren’t for “all phenomena” (*sanzen*), each one of us would not exist. There is no difference between all the molecules of our body and the environment around us. We are the environment and the environment is us. We are the single life entity and all phenomena. All life is a part of the same thing.

There is only one source of life. That is *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is *ichinen sanzen*. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* comprises everything. It is everything. It is all that there ever was...all that there ever will be. It has always been, and it always will be. Life has never come from any other source. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is permanent and constant. It is only the form of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* which changes.

REINCARNATION AND KARMA

Many Buddhist sutras teach about people dying and being reborn as someone else. There are many examples in the sutra and sacred writings of Nichiren Daishonin²³ where Shakyamuni speaks of his previous lives. For instance, in one of his previous lives he was born as Bodhisattva Jofukyo²⁴, and at another time as Sessen Doji.²⁵ When we hear these stories we may think, “I, myself will reincarnate as a particular human being.” But I don’t think that’s the case.

Someone asked me whether the butterflies which appeared emerging out of the rubble of the World Trade Center a month after 9/11 were an incarnation of the human beings who had died on 9/11. To be honest, as a human being, I don’t know if they were or not.

Back in the 13th century, during Nichiren Daishonin’s time, there were three farmers from Atushara Village who were persecuted for being followers of the Daishonin. They were eventually beheaded by the

²³ Sacred writings of Nichiren Daishonin – the Buddhist term is *goshō*.

²⁴ Bodhisattva Jofukyo – (or Fukyo) Bodhisattva Never Despise whose story appears in the 20th Chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

²⁵ Sessen Doji – a hermit who in practicing austerities in pursuit of enlightenment encountered a demon who taught him the Law.

government for their beliefs. Their lives disappeared from this world, but their spirits merged into the greater universe, which includes all physical aspects of the universe as well as all spiritual, unseen aspects of the universe within the three time periods of past, present and future. In Buddhism this “greater universe” is known as *sanzen daisen sekai*. The lives of the three farmers fused with this greater universe, and from there manifested into a different form of life. That different form of life could be human or any other form of life. This is Nichiren Daishonin’s teaching of the disappearance and manifestation of life.

There is not a direct linkage between one person dying and another person appearing; it is more dynamic than that. One life disappears, merges into the life of the greater universe, and then from the greater universe another life will re-form and appear as a human being.

When we die and disappear from this physical world and merge into the universe, we lose our identity as a particular life form, a particular shape, a particular color, a particular smell, etc. Everything disappears and our spirit merges into the greater universe. This is a difficult concept to explain, but here is an example: If I were to smash a cookie, it would disintegrate into small, tiny particles which we call atoms and molecules. The same

would happen if we were to smash, let's say a radio. If we smashed a radio, it would also be reduced to atoms and molecules, as well. Can the atoms resulting from the smashing of the radio and the atoms resulting from the smashing of the cookie be distinguished, one from the other? I would have to say, no.

Likewise, the particles that compose the form of one human being or an object will merge into the universe and lose their individual identity. Hence no longer will I have the identity of myself, and no longer will you have the identity of who you are in this life.

One might wonder how karma figures into all of this. Karma consists of many, many, factors. Karma is not just you in isolation. Many components make us who we are, such as parents, family, society, country, history, etc. The same is true of karma. I am one member of a family. Being a member of a particular family contributes one type of karma to me. A cluster of karmas make us who we are.

Or one may ask what about collective karma as opposed to individual karma?

Even though we use such terms as "collective karma" and "individual karma", there are not clear lines between the two. In terms of what we call *ichinen sanzen*, it all comes down to one large entity of karma. Individual karma can be considered as part of it.

Let me explain further. If you are in a family, you look at other members of your family and say, "That's my family." Another member of your family looks at you and the other members and says, "That's my family." In that sense the individual and the collective or the whole are indistinguishable. Yet all your combined factors make you very unique. The same can be said of karma.

The lives of different individuals merge into the universe without discrimination between believers of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism and non-believers, or how one lived in a previous life. We all merge into a collective whole. If we approached our daily prayer from Daishonin's perspective, our attitude would be that we want to positively influence others. It is not our aspiration to make a distinction between those who chant and those who do not, with the attitude that those who chant are superior to others. We are all the same. When we chant, we are not chanting just for ourselves. We are chanting for others to chant with us so that the power we gain from chanting can be shared with others. The intention being that when we all fuse into the greater universe, the collective whole will have a greater infusion of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*.

We all live in this society as individuals and have points of view different from one another. The *Namu-*

myoho-rence-kyo which we chant is so powerful that it can influence not only the limited environment in which we live, but can influence the entire universe. One may not necessarily want to merge into a collective group with others, but each of us has enough power to influence others. We don't have to be influenced by others; we can be more dynamic than others and thus influence them. *Namu-myoho-rence-kyo* is more influential than anything.

That entity that is the core of our hearts, the core of our lives is the thing that connects each of us to the life of Buddha when we chant *Namu-myoho-rence-kyo* to Gohonzon. For instance, sometimes we may feel that we don't want to do *Gongyo* but we do it anyway. Because we do it, our lives begin to feel energized. That feeling comes about because the core of our hearts has been activated and energized as a result of connecting to Gohonzon. That life or that core, which I am attempting to describe, unfortunately cannot be described in a succinct way. That's why I made reference to atoms and molecules. The core of our hearts is an intangible. That feeling of being energized is the feeling we want to achieve when we chant. We chant to become closer to the Buddha in our hearts.

DESIRES ARE ENLIGHTENMENT (*BONO SOKU BODAI*)

The essential nature of this age is good and evil. Good and evil are as intermingled as milk in coffee. When you add milk to coffee, the milk mixes and becomes inseparable. Desires (*bonno*) and enlightenment (*bodai*) are the same. They are inseparable. This Buddhist principle is referred to as *bono soku bodai* – desires are enlightenment.

A single statement made by an individual can be taken as a great declaration by one person, and an outrageous lie by another person. Just one single statement can be viewed in very different ways.

In his early teachings, Shakyamuni taught that negative thoughts had to be eliminated and, that one needed to purify one's mind to attain enlightenment. But in the Lotus Sutra, taught at the very end of Shakyamuni's teachings, he said there needs to be a law by which anyone can become enlightened, because no one can separate good and evil from one's life. The law, therefore, has to be powerful enough to enlighten life where good and evil co-exist indivisibly.

Shakyamuni illustrated this well in the 12th chapter of the Lotus Sutra. As the story goes, Shakyamuni's cousin,

Devadatta²⁶ was jealous of the Buddha and tried on numerous occasions to kill him and usurp his position. On one occasion Devadatta tried to roll a boulder on the Buddha to crush him. At another time he unleashed a wild elephant in an attempt to trample him. While he never succeeded at killing Shakyamuni, Devadatta committed himself to the path of evil until the very last day of his life. In the end, while attempting to kill the Buddha with fingernails saturated with snake venom, Devadatta plunged into a crevice in the earth created during an earthquake. Just before he fell Shakyamuni urged him to take faith. Perhaps out of fear Devadatta tried, but unfortunately only managed to utter, "*Namu*"²⁷ as he plunged to his death. It is said he went straight to hell. Shakyumuni, with his supernatural powers, visited Devadatta in hell and encouraged him to follow the Law. The Buddha predicted that Devadatta would become Heavenly King Buddha in a future life. And as Heavenly

²⁶ Devadatta – In their youth Siddhartha (Shakyamuni) and Devadatta fell in love with the same woman, the beautiful princess Yashodhara. Siddhartha won her hand in marriage. Devadatta never forgave him, hence discord ensued between them.

²⁷ Namu- devotion

King Buddha he would live in a world called Heavenly Way and abide there for 20 kalpas.²⁸

Shakyamuni's followers were surprised and even angered at Shakyamuni's treatment of Devadatta. Devadatta had attempted to kill the Buddha on numerous occasions, and yet, the Buddha tried to save him. This the disciples could not understand. Shakyamuni explained his actions, saying, "Devadatta was my teacher in a past life. Thanks to his guidance I was able to become enlightened. Now I can show my appreciation to him."

We learn from this that within the three existences of past, present and future good and evil have an inseparable nature. Thus, it is not just in the present time, it is consistent through the three existences.

There are many, many parables throughout the sutras of Shakyamuni that emphasize this point. Another

²⁸ Kalpa – In "Letter to Horen" (Major Writings Vol. 7) Nichiren Daishonin defines kalpa as follows. "Suppose that the span of human life is eighty thousand years, and that it decreases one year every hundred years, or ten years every thousand years. Let us suppose that it decreases at this rate until the life span has reached ten years....Then the process would reverse, and after a hundred years, the life span would increase to eleven years, and, after another hundred years to twelve years. After a thousand years it would have increased to twenty years, and this would continue until it once more reached eighty thousand years. The time required to complete this combined process of decrease and increase is called a kalpa."

example is Kishibojin,²⁹ who had countless children. Although she herself was a mother of many children, she kidnapped the children of other mothers and ate them, or fed them to her own children. Shakyamuni Buddha taught her a lesson by kidnapping and hiding one of her children. Through the agony she suffered from the loss of her own child Kishibojin came to realize the pain she had inflicted on other parents. From that moment on she vowed to be a protector of children. As a result, she became a Buddhist god³⁰, protecting the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra.

There are many stories of transformations from bad to good. Even within the same individual's lifetime there can be actions taken that lead in a completely different direction. So again there is this indivisible nature of good and evil within our lives.

By the same measure can we view the indivisibility and interrelatedness of our desires and enlightenment. That is the meaning of *bonno soku bodai* (desires are enlightenment). This concept, that one individual has an inseparable good and evil nature, was only taught in the

²⁹ Kishibojin – also Kishimojin – the mother-of-devils or the goddess of children. She appears in the 26th chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

³⁰ Buddhist god – force of nature.

Lotus Sutra. The idea of desires are enlightenment may sound like a contradiction, but it's not. It is true.

ON VEGETARIANISM

Vegetables are like people. It is not right to think that you can eat vegetables but not animals. Vegetables, animals, they are all life. If you are concerned about eating a living thing, you have to realize that all things that we need to nourish our bodies are alive or have had life. If you think this way, you would have to eliminate everything. There is scientific proof that when a cabbage, for example, is being cut, the cabbage signals telepathically through electric energy that it hurts. A plant has the same life value as an animal. It is wrong to think that you can eat a vegetable, but should not eat an animal, unless of course it is for medical reasons.

WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR LIFE IF WE DON'T PRACTICE TRUE BUDDHISM?

Let's compare electricity to the Law of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. For those who practice, the flow of the ultimate Law of life is always turned on. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is there. It's always there, even in death. But if you don't know how to turn on the switch, you can't see. You are operating in the dark and you don't know which way to go. You will therefore be relegated to a lower state of existence in your next life. That's why it is so important for us to chant for those who have passed away—to open their lives, or to keep their lives open to the flow of this electricity—the flow of the Law.



VII

A PARABLE

KANKUCHO

High, high above miles and miles of untamed wilderness rises the impossible to reach Snow Mountains. Here bears roam freely, snagging fish from clear mountain streams. Snow leopards prey on deer. Snakes and vipers slither through trees and glide over the forest floor.

Without warning, geysers shoot sky-high streams of steamy mist, while unseen pools of quicksand lie in wait under fallen leaves to swallow up unsuspecting victims.

What cathedral could look more majestic, or look more dominant? What cathedral could be more pure than these ever-white mountains, whose peaks are solid gold spires when reflecting the rising and setting sun? These mountains are bewitching, and awesome, beckoning all to come see.

Living atop a tree, high above the dangers of these incomparable mountains is a bird named Kankucho. His name reflects his extraordinary beauty; a beauty which is as fleeting as the brief but vivid life of a butterfly.

When the sun goes down in the Snow Mountains, bitter cold sets in. The winds swirl the heavily falling snow, and lash and twist and eventually snap the brittle bows of trees. Kankucho sits at the end of a wisp of a branch, shivering and quaking as if he is permanently locked in

the eight freezing hells. Ice forms on his back. And when he cries, frozen tears quickly pile up like stalactites down his face.

Kankucho's shrill and plaintive cries pierce the night. "My suffering is the deepest suffering of all," he laments. "My plight in this world is the most dreadful." His agony is intense. So overwhelmed by it is he that he promises himself, "Tomorrow, at day break, I will build a warm, comfortable nest. This I will do without fail. Never, ever will I freeze again!"

In the morning the sun rises. Its glow turns the icy mountain peaks to golden spires and caresses Kankucho. Gradually the bird thaws out and falls asleep. His sleep is deep and untroubled. As the day grows longer, Kankucho awakens content and warm, and trills a song of cheerfulness. He fluffs his downy feathers, and hops along his bow to locate a more comfortable place. Looking down below in the tangled jungle thicket, he searches for what will entertain him for the rest of day. Yonder a bear catches a fish. Nearby a leopard claws a rabbit. From high up on his perch Kankucho witnesses other creatures playing games of life and death throughout the forest. Sitting at the top of the world on his wisp of a branch, Kankucho finds all is safe and secure, right and warm in the world. There is nothing that threatens or distresses him.

Day in and day out, this is what Kankucho does. He spends his days in comfort, and never gives a thought to building his nest. When evening descends on the Snow Mountains the bitter cold sets in, and Kankucho's shrill, woeful cries are heard piercing the white nights all the rest of his life.

Nichiren Daishonin used Kankucho as a metaphor to exemplify the life of human beings who are negligent and squander their lives pursuing meaningless things such as fame and fortune. We should use our lives instead to practice the Buddha's Law, seek the Buddha-nature within, and follow the principles of Buddhism to live a fulfilling and purposeful life. If we don't, we will repeat our sufferings again and again and again.



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