

THE MIDDLE WAY[®]

ADVOCATING THE TRUE TEACHINGS OF NICHIREN THE TRUE BUDDHA

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The Middle Way

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Website: www.udumbarafoundation.org

E-mail: ufound@yahoo.com



Advisor: Reverend Raido Hirota
Founder and Editor-in-Chief: Peach Pair

In this issue: Translators: Junko Hokari & Yoko Mann
Editor: Art Shapiro

ON THE POSITION OF HIGH PRIEST

Reverend Raidō Hirota
Bucks County, Pennsylvania
June 2012

QUESTION: If high priests have considered themselves living Buddhas for the past 400 years, how are we to understand the 3rd prayer in reference to all the successive high priests? I'm still not sure how to view them other than to offer gratitude for the work that high priests (as well as other priests) have done to preserve the teachings down through the ages.

Reverend Raido Hirota (RH): By trying so hard to uphold the religious organization, the leadership became so engrossed in elevating the power of the high priest that they turned away from Nichiren Daishonin's¹ teachings. It's the result of historical events. I think this is a part of human nature which can be seen when human beings form a group. However, it contradicts the teachings of the 24 characters of Bodhisattva Jōfukyō² which we are currently studying together.

¹ Nichiren Daishonin – Daishonin – (1222-1282) the true Buddha who realized the Mystic Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō imbedded in the Lotus Sutra and established the Law as the means by which all living beings can become enlightened.

² The 24 characters of Bodhisattva Jōfukyō – Bodhisattva Fukyō – a bodhisattva described in the 20th chapter of the Lotus Sutra who revered everyone for their innate Buddha nature and said them: *I respect you deeply, I do not despise you or look down on you with contempt, because you have the capacity to become a Buddha of Namumyōhōrengekyō, if you believe in Namumyōhōrengekyō and practice.* He was persecuted for his compassionate behavior. In Japanese his statement is 24 *kanji* characters.

When I left Taiseikiji³, I started once again to earnestly study these teachings to understand the true meaning of Nichiren Daishonin's Law⁴. Then I realized that Nichiren Daishonin's teachings are about recognizing that all life is made up of ordinary lost beings like us, and that there is no perfect living Buddha. The Pope might present himself as if he is God, but all of us, the Pope included, are just human.

Believer 1 (B1): Since Nichiren Daishonin founded this religion or his teachings and handed his teachings to Nikko⁵, it appears that he wanted to have a high priest throughout the generations. Have there been times in the past that believers have been without a high priest? Is the office necessary? If it is a necessary position, how does the high priesthood get restored?

RH: High Priest is the highest position in Nichiren Shoshu⁶. As of now there have been 68 people on record who have held that position. Originally, at the beginning of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings there was no such concept as a living Buddha. They never thought like that within the religion. But during the Edo period in Japan (1600-1868), for about 270 years, the government realized that the people believed in too many different religions. So they tried to put a stop to it. As a result, each religion tried to make their religion distinct. Nichiren Shoshu was no different.

³ Taiseikiji – the head temple of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism. Also refers to the organization of Nichiren Shoshu (NST)

⁴ Nichiren Daishonin's Law - Namumyōhōrengyō

⁵ Nikko – Nikko Shonin – (1246-1333) – 2nd high priest of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism who received the transfer of the teachings directly from Nichiren Daishonin.

⁶ Nichiren Shoshu – the sect of Buddhism that embraces and recites the true Law of Namumyōhōrengyō as the original cause of enlightenment and believes in Nichiren Daishonin of the true Buddha.

At that time, to distinguish itself from other religions, Nichiren Shoshu initiated the concept of the living Buddha by declaring that the high priest, the leader of the religion, was the living Buddha. This idea was not in the original teachings, nor was it ever considered. Nichiren's basic teaching is that all people, without exception, born on this earth are ordinary human beings.

Believer 2 (B2): In the third prayer it says that Nichiren Daishonin possesses the "living essence," and that Nikko Shonin inherited the living essence from Nichiren Daishonin, and Nichimoku Shonin⁷ inherited it from Nikko Shonin. Then it says the successive high priests inherited the living essence as well. That seems to establish a hierarchy, placing the high priests above everybody else. Has this been misinterpreted by Nichiren Shoshu? Is this a carryover from the Edo period?

RH: During the Edo period the head of Nichiren Shoshu would have had to demonstrate very strong belief which would have been evident to ordinary believers so that the believers would hold the high priest in high esteem and be devoted to him. Because there was a lot of conflict during that time between religion and the government, the responsibility of dealing with the government and men in power, and establishing the reputation of a religion in society fell to the head of the religion. In order to maneuver one's way through that period the Law was at times twisted. Subsequently, the followers had to be persuaded to believe in the new law – the altered law – that the religion had

⁷ Nichimoku Shonin – (1260-1333) – 3rd high priest of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism who inherited the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin from Nikko Shonin.

created. So it became necessary to place someone in a position of spiritual superiority so that he would have the authority to make those changes. But in developing the means to satisfy the demands of the government by twisting the Law to establish the “living Buddha” status of the high priest and the inheritance of the “living essence” by high priests, a gap was created between the new position of the high priest and the true Law of Nichiren Daishonin. That is how it got started. Then that high priest passed on his new status to the next high priest. The next high priest could not deny the previous high priest’s actions, so he followed in suit. That is where the disparity between the true teachings and the position of the high priest began. And once the government recognized the elevated status of the high priest, the religion itself was elevated and recognized as being a superior religion.

B3: Why do we silently chant daimoku for Nichimoku Shōnin during the third prayer?

RH: The foundation of Nichiren Shōshū teachings was established by three founders: Nichiren Daishonin, Nikko Shonin, and Nichimoku Shonin. Firstly, Nichiren Daishonin showed us the teachings. Secondly, based on the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, Nikko Shonin understood that Nichiren Daishonin was the foremost original Buddha in Mappo⁸. Thirdly, Nichimoku Shonin understood the same through the teachings of Nikko Shonin, and strove to pass that knowledge down to future generations.

⁸ Mappo – The Latter Day of the Law - this present time period which began in 1052, about 2000 years after the death of Shakyamuni. It is called the evil age.

The way these three masters of the Lotus Sutra lived their lives formed the basis of Nichiren Shōshū. We can view this formation as: Nichiren Daishonin as father, Nikko Shonin as mother, and Nichimoku Shonin as child. That’s how this Law will pass down to the future. These three masters are absolutely essential, thus we cherish and respect them in a class of their own.

Usually in Japan in the progression of any organization or religion we identify the leadership as first generation, second generation, third generation, and so on. But because the founders—Nichiren Daishonin, Nikko Shonin and Nichimoku Shonin—were so essential in the establishment of the religion of Nichiren Shoshu we identify them differently. Nichiren Daishonin is called *shūso* which means founder of the religion. Nikko Shonin is called *kaiso*, meaning second founder. And Nichimoku Shonin is called *sanso*, which means third founder. But when it comes to the fourth high priest, Nichigyo Shonin and those who follow, we use the traditional method of identification and call them fourth generation, fifth generation, etc. Thus the three founders are given different titles from the other high priests. Their titles represent the three time periods of past, present and future. That is, Nichiren Daishonin = *shūso* = past; Nikko Shonin = *kaiso* = present; and Nichimoku Shonin = *sanso* = future. Past, present and future indicate the flow of time and together express eternity. Therefore these three founders together indicate that the religion carries on forever.

B2: Why is the daimoku chanted silently after Nichimoku Shonin in the third silent prayer?

RH: The first three founders are essential to the establishment of the religion. That is why we praise them individually. For the fourth, fifth and all successive generations of high priests we recognize their contribution to the religion by expressing our respect and gratitude silently.

B1: What you are saying then is that over the years, because the role of the high priest as a representative of Nichiren Shoshu to the government, the position became more important than it needed to be so that they could have a voice in front of the government. So what is the actual role of the high priest? If Taiseikiji comes back to the correct practice and we again recognize the high priest, what is the actual role, aside from making sure that the Law is practiced correctly? How should we look at the actual position? Is he simply a priest and a believer in Namumyōhōrengekyō⁹ who is a unifying focus for us when he teaches correctly? Or does he have other responsibilities?

RH: The high priest's actual role is to practice Nichiren Daishonin's teachings. Their practice must always be correct so that other people can look up to them. They must be the great example for other people. That is their role.

The 9th high priest, Nichiu Shonin, wrote a letter which is read at *Oeshiki*¹⁰. In the letter he states what the teaching is. He says, "If you build an extremely big, grand, elegant temple, that is not the Law. Having a large number of followers is also not the

⁹ Namumyōhōrengekyō - the Mystic Law which enlightens all Buddhas; the Supreme Law of life and the universe; the Buddha-nature in all things.

¹⁰ Oeshiki -the highest, most important holiday of Nichiren Shoshu celebrating "founder's day." See article on page 11 in this issue.

Law. For each believer to have correct faith, that is the Law, and that is the most important thing."

In the past, when a religion built a grand temple their main concern was to protect that temple. In order to protect the temple religions had to comply with the government or befriend the government. That meant that in order to protect the temple some religions had to twist their laws. That happened from time to time. But were they protecting the religion, or protecting the temple? There is a difference. Nichiu Shonin said the Law of Buddhism should not be changed to suit the government, or be changed by the relationship it has with the government. A lot of temples and shrines in Kyoto and Nara are heavily involved with the government. They are so involved that you could say those temples and religions hold a government position. Some Christian churches also have a relationship with the government. Nichiu Shonin said that is not right. You cannot twist the Law to suit the government's demands.



THE EIGHT WINDS

Reverend Raidō Hirota
Bucks County, Pennsylvania
June 2012

QUESTION: How can we not be swayed by the eight winds?

RH: The eight winds are:
Prosperity (*Ri*)
Decline (*Sui*)
Disgrace (*Ki*)
Honor (*Yō*)
Praise (*Shō*)
Censure (*Ki*)
Suffering (*Ku*)
Pleasure (*Raku*)

These eight different kinds of winds come from all directions and sneak in via all sorts of cracks. These winds tend to make our human hearts and our faith lose their grounding. This teaching warns us that we are all vulnerable to the eight winds.

Prosperity (*Ri*): It looks like it's a good thing, but with prosperity human desire gets bloated, then we start feeling dissatisfied because we can no longer feel grateful for our present situation. This leads us to lose ourselves.

Decline (*Sui*): Decline comes to everyone but nobody wants to accept it or acknowledge it. We lose our peace of mind over it and try to escape from it.

Disgrace (*Ki*): We experience defeat, and make mistakes in life. It's unavoidable. If you try to overcome this by lying, you can expect to experience much greater self-destructive conflict.

Honor (*Yō*): Praise is always pleasant. There are many people who lose their grounding when they receive some kind of decoration. There are people who, like Daisaku Ikeda,¹¹ collect honors from around the world. There are countless numbers of people who are misguided and believe that receiving praise and compliments determine their value. But Nichiren Daishonin said in the "Kaimoku Shō,"¹² "The most embarrassing thing is to be complimented by a fool." A fool is a person who doesn't even try to understand the truth of the teaching. To receive praise by such a fool is the most embarrassing thing. It's foolish to lose yourself based on the praise you receive from others.

Praise (*Shō*) and Honor (*Yō*) overlap, but in this world, people praise and when the recipient becomes arrogant, then they will start to criticize the person and verbally abuse him. That is **censure (*Ki*)**.

Suffering (*Ku*): Facing many different facets of hardship will be the very time that a person's true self appears, but most people try to run away from this hardship by complaining or blaming it on somebody else.

¹¹ Daisaku Ikeda – president of Soka Gakkai International, a lay organization that wrongly incorporates some of the doctrine of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism into its own philosophy and practice.

¹² Kaimoku Sho – "The Opening of the Eyes" goshō – one of Nichiren Daishonin's five major writings, which he wrote on Sado Island in 1271.

Pleasure (Raku): Just as the first wind, prosperity (Ri), seems like a good thing that happens to you, so does pleasure (Raku). But the condition of pleasure makes you forget to strive and thus will cause you to self-destruct.

There is a saying that states, “75% of the world is made up of jealousy.” The tenth world, which is the life of Buddha, exists in the life of the other nine worlds¹³ which consist of desire and confusion. The mutual possession of the Ten Worlds (*jikkaigogu*)¹⁴ is the life of faith. In other words, it is important to look at yourself objectively, consider the praise you receive from others as you live through this life, but do not let it lead your life, because the measure used in the world of jealousy and the measure used by devotees of Namumyōhōrengekyō are completely different.

What are your thoughts?

B2: Since you can’t avoid the eight winds, you have to look at everything through the lens of Namumyōhōrengekyō. Isn’t that the way to deal with the eight winds?

RH: The Japanese Buddhist word for “eight winds” is *happū*. A similar word to *happū* in Japanese is *myōmon myōri*, which means to live one’s life pursuing fame, riches, personal gain, and honor. The eight winds represent the elements of *myōmon myōri*. *Myōmon myōri* is the opposite of our teaching. Because you are

practicing so diligently, do you get the feeling that as you are practicing so hard you want a little recognition for your effort? People do have those thoughts. You have to look at yourself objectively. You have to know yourself. If you start having those thoughts and start moving in the direction of *myōmon myōri* and the way of the eight winds, you have to correct yourself. Because if you don’t, and someone notices that you are becoming like that and points out that you are wrong, you will become angry and discontent. So self-reflect – carefully scrutinize yourself. Then correct yourself.



¹³ The other nine worlds – Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity, Rapture or Heaven, Learning (*shomon*), Realization (*engaku*), Bodhisattva.

¹⁴ Mutual possession of the Ten Worlds (*jikkaigogu*) – each of the Ten Worlds contains the potential for all ten within itself, which means that life is not fixed in any one of the Ten Worlds, but can manifest any of the Ten Worlds, including Buddhahood, at any given moment.

THE FOURTEEN SLANDERS

Reverend Raidō Hirota
Bucks County, Pennsylvania
June 2012

QUESTION: I was reading the gosho¹⁵ "Letter to Niike" in which it states, "If one commits even one or two of the fourteen slanders set forth in this sutra, his offense is almost impossible to expiate." I know I have committed some of the fourteen slanders...In light of this passage, what can I do? Are the blessings gained from practicing the true Law and striving to live in accord with the teaching with my whole heart enough to expiate the offense of committing any of the fourteen slanders?

RH: The fourteen slanders are:

1) **Arrogance** (*Kyōman*) - To mock the Buddhist Law by taking it lightly and being full of conceit.

2) **Negligence** (*Ketai*) - To neglect to maintain your faith and practice.

3) **Arbitrary egotistical judgment** (*Kega*) - To make judgment on the Law of Buddhism based on your own knowledge.

4) **Shallow, self-satisfied understanding** (*Sensiki*) - To criticize the Law of Buddhism based on your knowledge and don't try to learn.

5) **Attachment to earthly desires** (*Jyakuyoku*) - To be fixated on your desires and don't try to learn the Law of Buddhism.

6) **Lack of seeking spirit** (*Fuge*) - Do not understand the Buddhist principles and are satisfied with your own point of view.

7) **Not believing** (*Fushin*) - You don't believe in the Law of Buddhism.

8) **Aversion** (*Hinshuku*) - To criticize Buddhism.

9) **Deluded doubt** (*Giwaku*) - To doubt Buddhism and are confused.

10) **Vilification** (*Hibō*) - To blame and make a derogatory remark about the Law of Buddhism.

11) **Contempt** (*Kyouzen*) - To mock and dismiss Buddhist practitioners who have faith in Buddhism and practice its teachings.

12) **Hatred** (*Zouzen*) - To hate Buddhist practitioners who believe in the Law of Buddhism and practice the faith.

13) **Jealousy** (*Shitsuzen*) - To envy and be jealous of the Buddhist practitioners who believe in the Law of Buddhism and practice the faith.

14) **Grudges** (*Konzen*) - To hold a grudge against the Buddhist practitioners who believe in the Law of Buddhism and practice the faith.

Anyone who has the life of Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity, Heaven, Learning, Realization, and Bodhisattva, has the ability to commit these fourteen slanders. The discussion on the eight winds describes the same content. To hold or have the thoughts and feelings of the fourteen slanders arises from having doubt about the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō. If you acknowledge the doubt welling up in your heart, attempt to understand what is

¹⁵ Gosho – the writings of Nichiren Daishonin.

causing it. Ask for answers. And ask yourself, "How did Nichiren Daishonin answer this?" By doing so, clear your doubts and don't look down on the Law of Buddhism just because you think your point of view is correct. That is how you can avoid perpetrating these Fourteen Slanders, or being defiled by them.

B4: If there is a way, how can one not commit any of the fourteen slanders? Some of them, such as hatred, jealousy, grudges, and contempt, are emotions that we all have, and even if we do fight them back we are human and sometimes we give in to these emotions.

RH: If you fall, you will get up, right? You can't live if you stay on the ground after you've fallen. If you fell, you will get up and think about the reason you fell, then you will be careful not to fall again, and thus reduce the number of times you fall. Also, you will be able to teach others what they can do when they fall. To be a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra means that you will live this life by having the teachings of the Lotus Sutra as the pillar of your life. If you are going to live by your own thoughts, it means that you view the Lotus Sutra lightly, and you will fall quickly. In this case, the pillar is you, so if you fall, you can't get up because there is no pillar that can hold you up. By contrast, the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra will consider their pillar to be the Lotus Sutra. So if they have fallen due to their confusion, they can still get up.

B3: If a person does not practice this Buddhism, but commits one of the fourteen slanders, can they do anything to expiate the sin? Is there anything they can do?

RH: The only thing they can do is to have the Lotus Sutra as their pillar.

B2: My mother slanders the Lotus Sutra on a daily basis. She slanders Buddhism and the people who practice. She commits all fourteen slanders. But because I practice, I told her, the gosho says one's family is protected for seven generations. I can see the protection in my family. But you can't escape cause and effect no matter who you are. So how will her slander affect her next life - her total life?

RH: Your mother is wonderful! If she can keep reacting that way it is a very good thing.

I said above, "If you fall," but I want to change that to "when you're lost." When you're lost, if you have the right map, and you know how to read it, you can get to your destination. The right map is universal. It is the same map no matter where you are in the world. Whether it's north, south, east or west, it is the same map. There is just one map. But you have to have the right map. Most times people have the wrong map. Or people don't know how to read the correct map. These people have lost their way, or they keep losing their way.

The way to do the correct practice is to employ the four pillars of this Buddhism. They are faith, practice, study and shakabuku¹⁶ (teach). 1) If you have a map, you have to believe that it is the correct map. So having faith is the first of the four pillars. 2) Even if you are looking at the correct map, it doesn't take you anywhere. You have to walk or drive. You have to move. So practice is the second of the four

¹⁶ Shakabuku - a method of propagating Buddhism teaching a person to the True Law and refuting erroneous views.

pillars. You can't just look at it, you have to act. 3) If you don't know how to read the map, you have to learn how to read it. So study is the third of the four pillars. 4) And if you have the right map, you know how to read it, and you can get to the place where you want to go, you can't keep that map to yourself. Say you had a friend who is lost. You want to give the right map to your friend and tell him or her that this is the right map and the one they are using is the wrong map. So teaching or shakabuku is the fourth pillar of this Buddhism. These four pillars are the correct practice. But when you tell your friend that this is the correct map, use this one, he may get angry and say, "No, mine is the correct map." But keep telling him.

The above is your mother's case. Because you are practicing Buddhism, even though she doesn't know anything about Buddhism, at least Buddhism is in her life. In this case she has a great possibility to someday recognize that she was wrong, and maybe her child was right. You are giving her the opportunity to notice that. That is why she may change the way she thinks. But sometimes people don't have any opportunity at all. If they live in a remote area, they might not get a chance to hear about this Buddhism, or get a chance to slander this Buddhism because they don't have any connection to it. Or if you didn't tell your mother about this Buddhism she couldn't change. But because you've told her, she may change.

B1: I've always taken consolation in one of the goshos of the Daishonin that says that we have great fortune to be born a human being, and even greater fortune to encounter Namumyōhōrengekyō, and still greater fortune to practice. So when someone comes to my house and asks me

about the butsudān¹⁷, I tell them that I chant Namumyōhōrengekyō. But I don't put any pressure on them. Unless they ask more questions, I say nothing else. I take consolation in the fact that at least they have encountered Namumyōhōrengekyō, and that in this lifetime or in the next, because they have enough fortune to hear the Law, they will eventually practice. Is that the correct attitude?

RH: Sometimes I see that people who practice Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism are shy about revealing their belief, so they try to hide what they practice. They just want to believe and practice by themselves. They don't want to incite negative reactions or bad feelings from their family and friends. That is not the right way to practice. It doesn't matter whether someone asks you or doesn't ask you about this religion. The most important thing is not to hide what you are doing. Give people the opportunity to connect with this Buddhism. Give them an opportunity to practice and become enlightened. Let them know of the existence of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings. That is what is most important.

B1: Do I understand the goshō correctly? The fact that someone has been introduced to Namumyōhōrengekyō, I believe, opens a small door or window so that in the future, whether it's this lifetime or the next, they will practice. Is that the meaning of the goshō passage when it says what great fortune it is to encounter this Law? Can I be confident that they will one day practice?

¹⁷ Butsudān – the cabinet that houses the object of worship (Gohonzon) of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

RH: Yes, that's the right understanding, and it's a wonderful thing to do.

When we chant Odaimoku¹⁸ at Sanbo-in Temple, we beat a big Japanese drum (*taiko*) to the rhythm of the chant. It makes a big sound. When someone hears that sound they may think, "Oh, that's a temple." Or, "That's a lot of noise. I don't like that sound, it's annoying." Or if it is a believer of Nichiren Shoshu, he may find it a very pleasurable sound. If one hundred people hear that sound, there will be one hundred different reactions. One day someone came into the temple to complain about the sound. He said it was too noisy, and told me to stop beating the drum. I said to that person that we chant Odaimoku for a long time, and then asked could we please beat the drum for only five minutes? He agreed. So that's what we do now at Sanbo-in. We only beat the drum for the first five minutes of Odaimoku. As for the person who complained about the drum, he may have been someone just walking by, but he heard the sound. The beating of the drum to the rhythm of Odaimoku is letting people connect to Namumyōhōrengekyō when they hear the sound.

There are two relationships one can form with Namumyōhōrengekyō. They are: believing or taking faith (*juen*), and reverse relationship or opposing it (*gyakuen*). When you try to tell others about the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō, most people will reject it. But even though they don't want to hear about it, you still tell them. These days most people oppose Namumyōhōrengekyō. And sadly, even though people believe in Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, most of the time their belief is

not 100%. There is a small part of you that says, "I don't know about that." Or, "I'm not sure about that." There's just some part that goes against what you believe, or what you want to believe. You have these thoughts within you, but you still believe in Nichiren Shoshu. Most people are not 100% believers in this religion. It's sad. But it's the reality. Consequently, almost everyone opposes it. Almost everyone is in the category of *gyakuen*. At this time with a weakened global economy, people are very vulnerable to becoming very suspicious. Nevertheless, despite the time we live in, the teaching of Nichiren Shoshu is to connect other people to Namumyōhōrengekyō.



¹⁸ Odaimoku – daimoku – the invocation of chanting of Namumyōhōrengekyō.

ŌESHIKI

Reverend Raidō Hirota
Sanbo-in Temple
Fukuyama City, Japan



The Ōeshiki ceremony is the most important Buddhist service, for it celebrates Nichiren Daishonin's eternal life as well as the eternal Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō. Having an Ōeshiki Buddhist service deepens our faith.

During gongyo¹⁹, just after the *Ni-setsu-gē-gon* passage of the *Juryo* chapter, and just before the *Jiga-gē* section, stop the recitation of the sutra and read in a loud voice a passage of the Risshō Ankoku Ron²⁰ from, "*The host exclaimed with delight: As the proverb says, the dove has changed into a hawk, the sparrow into a clam!*" to the end of the gosho.

In a formal Ōeshiki ceremony the shakubuku letter written to the Kamakura government by ninth High Priest Nichiū Shōnin, Nichiren Daishonin's Risshō Ankoku Ron, Daishōnin's shakubuku letter to the Kamakura government, the shakubuku letter of second High Priest Nikkō Shōnin to the Kamakura government, the shakubuku letter of third High Priest Nichimoku Shōnin to the

Kamakura government, the shakubuku letter of fourth High Priest Nichidō Shōnin to the Kamakura government, and the shakubuku letter to the Kamakura government by fifth High Priest Nichigyō Shōnin are read in front of the Gohonzon²¹ by the priests one after another in this order. This is done so that we do not change this faith after Nichiren Daishōnin's death. No matter what time period, we must make it paramount to work for the sake of *kōsen-rūfū* and the enlightenment of all living beings.

You should make paper cherry blossoms and decorate the left and right sides of the Gohonzon, specifically because even though Nichiren Daishōnin died in autumn—the 13th day of the 10th month—the cherry blossoms bloomed throughout the country. The lotus flower symbolizes the teachings of Shakyamuni²² of India; after 2000 years during the Latter Day of the Law Buddhism came to Japan where the essence of Buddhism was elucidated by Nichiren Daishōnin. The cherry blossom symbolizes the passage of true Buddhism to Japan.

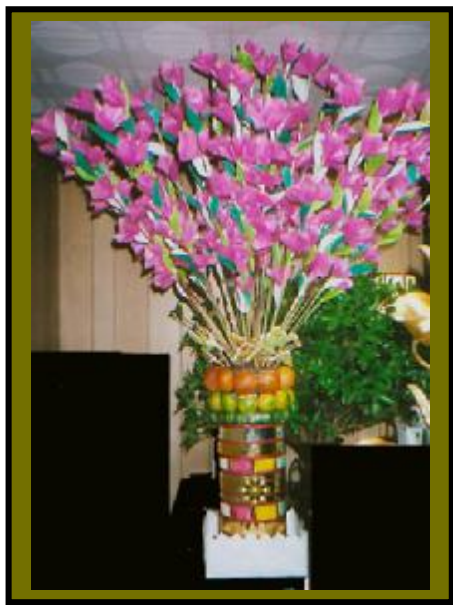
¹⁹ Gongyo – the practice of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism which entails the morning and evening recitation of the 2nd and 16th chapters of the Lotus Sutra and chanting Namumyōhōrengekyō.

²⁰ Risshō Ankoku Ron – “Securing the Peace of Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism”. One of the major writings of Nichiren Daishonin in which he explains to the ruling clan that in order for the country to be peaceful and secure, the people need to abandon their faith in erroneous teachings and embrace the True Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō.

²¹ Gohonzon – the object of worship of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism which represents the universal Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō and the Buddha nature in all things.

²² Shakyamuni - Shakyamuni Buddha – Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (1029 BCE-949 BCE), the historical founder of Buddhism on this earth.

The photograph below shows a vase of cherry blossoms on the altar at Sanbo-in Temple in Fukuyama City, Japan. From the Buddhist perspective, the body of the vase in



which the flowers are placed symbolize the Law of Buddhism and is representative of Mt. Sumeru.²³ The height of Mt. Sumeru is 84,000 *yojana*²⁴ above sea level, and 84,000 *yojana* below sea level. One of the decorations on the vase (not clearly visible) illustrates the stars in the heavens. Another decoration (also not clearly visible) represents the waves which surround Mt. Sumeru. And a third symbol represents the mountains. These three symbols surround the flowers in the cone of the vase. The three colorful belts encircling the vase which support Mt. Sumeru represent the gold wheel, the water wheel, and the wind wheel. The white mountain-shaped papers surrounding the base of the vase symbolize Mt. Sumeru's seven surrounding mountains and seven oceans. In the sea surrounding the seventh gold mountain

there are 4 continents. The southern most continent is Jambudvīpa²⁵ where humans live. If you are not born into this world of Jambudvīpa, you cannot connect with Buddhist teachings. The cherry blossoms decorating the summit of Mt. Sumeru symbolize *kōsen rūfū*²⁶ and the enlightenment of all living beings.

In Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism we do not offer colorful flowers to Gohonzon, except at Oeshiki. You may leave the flowers decorating the altar until the end of the year. Then, in order to avoid the misunderstanding that Nichiren Shōshū decorates the Gohonzon with colorful flowers, at the end of the year please destroy and throw the cherry blossoms away.



²³ Mt. Sumeru – in ancient Indian cosmology Sumeru was the highest mountain in the center of the world.

²⁴ Yojana - 1 *yojana* (an Indian measurement) is 7-9 miles

²⁵ Jambudvīpa – in ancient Indian cosmology it is one of the four continents surrounding Mt. Sumeru.

²⁶ *Kōsen rūfū* – to widely declare and spread True Buddhism.

GOSHO SELECTION

Excerpt

THE FOURTEEN SLANDERS²⁷

I have received the string of coins, the horseload of polished rice and the white kimono which you sent.

Rolling fields and hills stretch out more than a hundred *ri* to the south of this mountain. To the north stands lofty Mount Minobu, which joins the peaks of Shirane farther off. Jutting sharply up to the west is a peak called Shichimen. Snow remains on these peaks throughout the year. There is not a single dwelling other than mine in the area. My only visitors, infrequent as they are, are the monkeys that come swinging through the treetops. And to my regret, even they do not stay for long, but scurry back to where they came from. To the east run the overflowing waters of the Fuji River, which resemble the flowing sands of the desert. It is extraordinary indeed that you send letters from time to time to this place whose inaccessibility makes visitors rare.

I learned that Priest Nichigen²⁸ of Jisso-ji temple, upon becoming a disciple of mine, was driven out by his own disciples and parishioners and had to give up his lands, so that he now has no place of his own. Nonetheless, he still visits me and

²⁷ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. 3, pp 205-209.

²⁸ Priest Nichigen - Nichigen (d. 1315): The priest of Jisso-ji temple in Suruga Province, which belonged to the Tendai sect. He became a disciple of Nichiren Daishonin after the latter's retirement to Mt. Minobu. Later, he returned to Jisso-ji and converted other priests, building many temples in Musashi and Suruga provinces.

takes care of my disciples. What devotion to the Way! How saintly! Nichigen is already unrivaled as a scholar of Buddhism. Yet he has discarded all desire for fame and fortune and become my disciple. He has lived the words in the sutra, "We do not hold our own lives dear." To express his gratitude to the Buddha, he has taught you and your fellow believers and inspired you, Matsuno, to make these sincere offerings. All this is truly amazing.

The Buddha stated that during the Latter Day of the Law, priests and nuns with the hearts of dogs would be as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges. By this he meant that the priests and nuns of that day would run like dogs after fame and fortune. Because they wear robes and surplices, they look like ordinary priests and nuns. But in their hearts, they wield a sword of evil, hastening here and there among their patrons and filling them full of countless lies so as to keep them away from other priests or nuns. Thus they strive to keep their patrons to themselves and prevent other priests or nuns from coming near them, like a dog who goes to a house to be fed but who growls and springs to attack the moment another dog approaches. Each and every one of these priests and nuns is certain to fall into the evil paths. Being the scholar that he is, Nichigen must have read this passage in the sutra. His unusual consideration and frequent visits to me and my disciples are deeply appreciated.

In your letter you write, "Since I took faith in this sutra [the Lotus], I have continued to recite the *junyoze*²⁹ and the

²⁹ Junyoze - Strictly speaking, the portion of the Hoben (2nd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra which reads, "The true entity of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas. This reality consists of appearance, ... and their consistency from beginning to

*Jigage*³⁰ and chant the daimoku without the slightest neglect. But how great is the difference between the blessings received when a sage chants the daimoku and the blessings received when we chant it?" To reply, one is in no way superior to the other. The gold that a fool possesses is in no way different from the gold that a wise man possesses; a fire made by a fool is the same as a fire made by a wise man.

However, there is a difference if one chants the daimoku while acting against the intent of this sutra. There are many forms of slander that go against the correct practice of this sutra. Let me sum them up by quoting from the fifth volume of the *Hokke Mongu Ki*: "In defining the types of evil, the *Hokke Mongu* states briefly, 'Expound among the wise but not among the foolish.'³¹ One scholar³² enumerates the types of evil as follows: 'I will first list the evil causes and then their effects. There are fourteen evil causes: (1) arrogance, (2) negligence, (3) arbitrary, egotistical judgment, (4) shallow, self-satisfied understanding, (5) attachment to earthly desires, (6) lack of seeking spirit, (7) not believing, (8) aversion, (9) deluded doubt,

end." Here, however, it presumably indicates the part from the opening of the chapter:

Niji seson ju sammai anjo ni ki (At this time the World-Honored One serenely arose from meditation) through the passage on the ten factors ending with *hommatsu kukyoto* (consistency from beginning to end).

³⁰ *Jigage* - The verse section which concludes the *Juryo* (16th) chapter. It begins with the phrase *ji ga toku burrai* (Since I attained Buddhahood) and ends with the phrase *soku joju busshin* (quickly attain Buddhahood), restating the teaching of the eternity of the Buddha's enlightenment revealed in the foregoing prose section of the same chapter.

³¹ The *Hiyu* (3rd) chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* says that one should not expound this sutra among the foolish, in order to protect them from committing the evil of slandering the sutra.

³² One scholar - Tz'u-en (632-682), the founder of the Chinese Hossō school. He was among the most outstanding disciples of Hsuan-tsang.

(10) vilification, (11) contempt, (12) hatred, (13) jealousy and (14) grudges." Since these fourteen slanders apply equally to priesthood and laity, you must be on guard against them.

Bodhisattva Fukyo of old said that all people have the Buddha nature and that if they embrace the *Lotus Sutra*, they will never fail to attain Buddhahood. He further stated that to slight a person is to slight the Buddha himself. Thus, his practice was to revere all people. He revered even those who did not embrace the *Lotus Sutra* because they too had the Buddha nature and might someday believe in the sutra. Therefore, it is all the more natural to revere those priests and lay people who do embrace the sutra.

The fourth volume of the *Lotus Sutra* states, "The offense of uttering even a single derogatory word against the priests or laity who believe in and preach the *Lotus Sutra* is even graver than that of abusing Shakyamuni Buddha to his face for an entire kalpa." The *Lotus Sutra* also states, "[If anyone shall see a person who embraces this sutra and try to expose the faults or evils of that person, he will in the present age be afflicted with white leprosy,] whether what he speaks is the truth or not." Take these teachings to heart, and always remember that believers in the *Lotus Sutra* should absolutely be the last to abuse each other. All those who keep faith in the *Lotus Sutra* are most certainly Buddhas, and one who slanders a Buddha commits a grave offense.

When one chants the daimoku bearing in mind that there are no distinctions among those who embrace the *Lotus Sutra*, then the blessings he gains will be equal to those of Shakyamuni Buddha. In the *Kongobei Ron*, Miao-lo writes, "Both the life and environment of Hell exist within

the life of Buddha. On the other hand, the life and environment of Buddha do not transcend the lives of common mortals." You can surmise the significance of the fourteen slanders in light of the above quotations.

That you have asked me about Buddhism shows that you are sincerely concerned about your future life. The Lotus Sutra states that people who will listen to [and accept] this teaching are very rare. Unless the Buddha's true envoy appears in this world, who can expound this sutra in exact accord with the Buddha's intent? And moreover, it would appear that there are very few who ask about the meaning of the sutra in an effort to resolve their doubts and thus believe in it wholeheartedly. No matter how humble a person may be, if his wisdom is in the least bit greater than yours, you should ask him about the meaning of the sutra. But the people in this evil age are so arrogant, prejudiced, and attached to fame and fortune that they are afraid that, should they become the disciple of a humble person or try to learn something from him, they will be looked down upon by others. They never rid themselves of this wrong attitude, so they seem to be destined for the evil paths.

The Hosshi chapter states in essence, "The blessings obtained by making offerings to a priest who teaches the Lotus Sutra are even greater than the blessings obtained by offering incalculable treasures to the Buddha for eight billion kalpas. And if one can then hear him teach this sutra for even a moment, he shall experience delight at the great benefit he has obtained."

Even an ignorant person can obtain blessings by serving someone who expounds the Lotus Sutra. No matter if he is a demon or an animal, if he proclaims

even a single verse or phrase of the Lotus Sutra; you must respect him as you would the Buddha. This is what the sutra means when it says, "Most certainly one should rise and greet him from afar, and respect him in the same way as one does the Buddha." You should respect one another as Shakyamuni Buddha and Taho Buddha did at the ceremony³³ in the Hoto chapter.

....

With my Deep Respect
Nichiren

The ninth day of the twelfth month in the second year of Kenji (1276)



³³ In the Hoto (11th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni assembles all the Buddhas from throughout the universe and then opens the Treasure Tower. Taho Buddha invites him to share his seat, and the Ceremony in the Air begins.

How to Make Simple Cherry Blossoms

Reprinted from "DIY Cherry Blossoms" by Kara
At creationsbykara.com

SUPPLIES:

- Tissue paper
- Scissors
- Glue
- Branches of dowels

INSTRUCTIONS:

1-Stack several pieces of tissue on top of each other and cut out a flower shape. It does not need to be perfect! Mine were about 2 1/2" across and had five petals, but it doesn't really matter that much. I wanted to do two colors, but you can just do one. And because I know a few of you are bound to notice. . . yes, my light pink paper has words on it. But it's all I had and I knew once it was all scrunched up they wouldn't show. Which they don't. Thank goodness.



2-For two-toned cherry blossoms, stack two flowers on top of each other with the petals not matched up.



3-Now just scrunch the flower petals up and twist the whole thing together at the bottom.



I thought it would be more realistic if there were variations in the blossoms, so I made some light pink, some dark pink, and some with the two colors together. To make smaller blossoms like the two on the left, just scrunch up one flower at a time.



4-Now it's time to glue them to your branches. I used branches that I pruned from our apple tree. If you don't have your own tree, check with your neighbors. You should be able to find some unwanted branches this time of year.

I think it looks best to apply the blossoms to the natural buds of the branch. Just add a tiny dab of hot glue, and press your blossom on.



Continue adding blossoms to all sides of your branches.



5-When you are all finished, just stick them in the container of your choice. I added some wheat at the bottom to hold them in place.



Happy Oeshiki!

Congratulations!!!