

Catalyst for District Discussion The Formality of Gongyo

The “Catalyst for District Discussion” is intended to stimulate lively conversations about the practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

On May 4, 1993, SGI President Ikeda spoke about the formality of gongyo at a Kansai general meeting held at Soka University, Tokyo. The following are excerpts from that timeless guidance, vital to the understanding of the fundamentals of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. The full text appears in the SGI-USA booklet titled Selected Speeches on the Basics of Buddhism.

Faith is a lifelong pursuit. It is also an eternal one, continuing over the three existences of past, present and future. Kosen-rufu, too, is a long, long journey.

How, then, on this journey toward happiness, can we stay the course to the end? How can we live so as to make each day of our precious lives valuable and exhilarating?

Doing so requires profound wisdom. For example, there are times when we suffer from exhaustion or feel under the weather. This is only natural since we are creatures of flesh and blood. At such times, what should we do about gongyo? What should our attitude be toward chanting daimoku? Today, in response to the members’ day-to-day concerns, I shall address these points in light of Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings. Such concrete guidance based on them is important.

Judge Wisely According to Each Situation

Essentially, the Daishonin says that, depending on the situation, it is all right to just chant daimoku, and that we need not necessarily sit before the Gohonzon to do so.

This is how the Daishonin responded to a question from the wife of a follower, Hiki Daigaku Saburo Yoshimoto. The wife had asked whether she should refrain from carrying out her daily Buddhist practice during her menstrual period. Since ancient times, it had been a common belief in Japan that menstruation represented a kind of pollution. It appears that the woman who put this question to the Daishonin was worried about whether it was acceptable to read and recite Buddhist scriptures at such a time.

In response, the Daishonin emphasizes that there is no cause for avoidances in connection with menstruation, and that, rather, menstruation has an important biological function. For the time in which he lived, such a view was remarkably enlightened.

“Or in another sense,” he says, “it [menstruation] might be regarded as a kind of chronically recurring illness” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 6, p. 12), and goes on to explain the type of practice that would be best suited for such times.

At present, the question of “pollution” or “impurity” in connection with menstruation is no longer an issue. Indeed, in a broader sense, we can interpret the Daishonin’s words as providing a clear direction on what we should do about reciting the sutra, that is, gongyo, when ill or feeling poorly. In other words, the Daishonin here indicates the principle that gongyo is a practice that should be carried out with flexibility in accordance with various circumstances.

No Reference to Set Form of Gongyo

In a preceding passage, the Daishonin says:

This is a matter that concerns all women and about which they always inquire. In past times, too, we find many persons addressing themselves to this question concerning women. But because the sacred teachings put forward by the Buddha in the course of his lifetime do not touch upon this point, no one has been able to offer any clear scriptural proof upon which to base an answer. (MW-6, 11)

The Daishonin says that all who have commented on the matter, being unable to produce documentary proof based on the Buddhist scriptures, merely speak arbitrarily. By contrast, the Daishonin always made the scriptures his foundation. That is why we, too, always advance basing ourselves on the scripture of the Latter Day of the Law.

Similarly, regarding the custom of doing five prayers during morning gongyo and three prayers during evening gongyo, nowhere in his writings is such a practice set forth. It is a form that came about at a later time.

Moreover, originally, this form of gongyo was part of the practice for priests. It would appear, however, that today it is priests who are failing to adhere to this form. That lay people, with their busy schedules, should be following such a regimen of daily practice is truly remarkable.

“Dispense With the Reading of the Sutra”

In conclusion, Nichiren Daishonin states: “If you feel so inclined, then dispense with the reading of the sutra and simply recite Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Also, when making your devotions, you need not bow facing the sutra [the Gohonzon]” (MW-6, 13).

It is perfectly acceptable just to chant daimoku without reciting the sutra. Moreover, the Daishonin says that we need not necessarily do gongyo or chant daimoku in front of the Gohonzon. Here, the Daishonin also takes into account the case where a person [incapacitated by illness or other reasons] might do gongyo or chant daimoku lying down. In this way, he always showed great flexibility toward the formal aspects of practice. He always taught that “faith alone is what really matters” (MW-1, 246).

Of course, we must not take this as license to be negligent and lazy in our practice. It goes without saying that we must always diligently strive to carry out the basic practice of doing gongyo and chanting daimoku. If you purposely use the Daishonin’s writings to justify neglecting your Buddhist practice, it will only result in your own loss. It is not for anyone else, but for our own happiness that we practice faith.

The Daishonin’s statement that it is all right simply to chant daimoku is based on the premise of the great benefit of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

At the beginning, he says:

In the case of the Lotus Sutra, one may recite the entire sutra of twenty-eight chapters in eight volumes every day; or one may recite only one volume, or one chapter, or one verse, or one phrase, or one word; or one may simply chant the daimoku, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, only once a day . . . (MW-6, 3)

In other words, he says there are many possible ways of reciting the Lotus Sutra. He then continues:

Or [one may] chant it only once in the course of a lifetime; or hear someone else chant it only once in a lifetime and rejoice in the hearing; or rejoice in hearing the voice of someone else rejoice in the hearing . . . (ibid.)

The sound of daimoku can even cause others to respond with joy when they hear it. Therefore, let us always strive to chant such invigorating and refreshing daimoku that draws forth this response in others.

Through hearing our voices chanting the Mystic Law, hearing the confidence that resonates therein, it is possible to inspire joy in others and make a strong impression upon them of how wonderful and energetic the SGI members are, and of how coming in contact with them always leaves us feeling happy and refreshed. Others, again, may simply rejoice when encountering the happy, glowing faces and the beautiful smiles of our members.

In this respect, our outward appearance is important. This accords with the principle that all phenomena manifest the true aspect of life (*shoho jisso*). Indeed, such a joyous response is truly evident among friends of the SGI. One person after another responding with joy in a chain reaction — this principle lies at the root of our movement to introduce others to the SGI.

Benefit of Hundreds of Thousands of Times Greater Than From Other Teachings

The Daishonin continues:

And so [this chain of rejoicing continues] on to fifty removes from the original individual who first chanted the daimoku.

In such a case, of course, the spirit of faith would become weak and the feeling of rejoicing much diluted, like the vague notions that might occur to the mind of a child of two or three, or like the mentality of a cow or a horse, unable to distinguish before from after. And yet the blessings gained by such a person are a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand times greater than those gained by persons of excellent innate ability and superior wisdom who study other sutras: persons such as Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Monju and Miroku, who had committed to memory the entire texts of the various sutras.

The Lotus Sutra itself tells us this, and the same opinion is expressed in the sixty volumes of commentary by T'ien-t'ai and Miao-lo. (MW-6, 3-4)

So great is the benefit of chanting daimoku. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo even once produces tremendous benefit, eternal benefit. This is the essence of our faith. We should have great confidence in this point.

Basing his remarks on a passage of the Lotus Sutra, the Daishonin states:

And yet we read that the blessings acquired by one who recites no more than a single word of the Lotus Sutra are the one thing alone [the Buddha wisdom] cannot fathom. How, then, could ordinary persons like ourselves, who have committed so many grave offenses, be capable of understanding such blessings? (MW-6, 4)

This is the great benefit of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo even once. A single arrow, shot by a great archer, will unerringly hit the mark. Similarly, a strong and deep prayer offered with unwavering *ichinen*, or concentration of mind, will, in accordance with the

principle that “a single life-moment contains three thousand realms” (*ichinen sanzen*), move the entire universe.

On Chanting for Long Periods of Time

Since such is the benefit of chanting a single daimoku, some of you might feel puffed up with pride because you managed to chant at least three daimoku today! Of course, it is important to feel such joy from practice. And it doesn't say anywhere in his writings how many daimoku or how many hours a day a person should chant.

It goes without saying, of course, that if you chant a lot of daimoku, it is all to the good. However, ultimately each of us must decide for ourselves the amount of daimoku we chant based on our awareness and determination. The amount of daimoku we chant is certainly not a matter of obligation or formality.

For instance, from time to time I hear of people chanting eight or ten hours in a single day. I bow my head to the intensity and earnestness of faith of these members. If, however, they neglect their responsibilities and commitments and just chant away, they cannot be said to be practicing in accord with the principle “faith manifests itself in daily life.” You must not allow your daily life to fall by the wayside or cause others, including members of your family, suffering and inconvenience because of your chanting many hours of daimoku. Nor should you go around boasting of the long hours of daimoku you have chanted in a day.

Carrying on in such a way can easily give rise to various misunderstandings among those around you. A person who has such an attitude may be viewed by neighbors as something of a fanatic. The result may be that the person loses others' trust and degrades the Law.

The same is true within the organization. There are instances when an organizational unit formally conducts a “ten-hour daimoku campaign” or the like. While there is nothing wrong with an activity of this kind if it is voluntarily undertaken by two or three willing people, difficulties arise when an attempt is made to impose such a rigid regimen equally on many people. For people have different daily schedules, they have different amounts of time available to them, they have different physical stamina and so on.

Consequently, it is possible that holding such an activity might impose unreasonable demands on any number of people. It is always necessary to exercise careful consideration. Moreover, we must never attempt to make participation in such activities compulsory. You must not goad people into attending activities by making extreme statements, such as saying, “If you fail to attend, you will not be following the way of the SGI.”

It is important that people derive joy, peace of mind and hope from their practice of faith. We must strictly refrain from giving guidance that oppresses people or causes them suffering. In giving guidance, leaders should always take into account the circumstances and conditions of each member.

Adapting the Precepts to the Locality

In the same writing addressed to the woman follower who sought advice on aspects of her practice, the Daishonin speaks of the principle of “adapting the practice to the locality” (*zuiho bini*), saying that people should practice Buddhism in a way that accords with the manners and customs of the country or area where we live. [The

precept of “adapting the practice to the locality” states that one may act in accordance with local custom or the customs of the times, provided the fundamental spirit of Buddhism is not violated.]

Further, the Daishonin strictly condemns rigid teachings that show complete disregard for people’s situations or daily lives, or the realities of society. For example, in the past, some people told overseas members, who are not accustomed to sitting on the floor on their knees, that they must not sit in a chair [when doing gongyo or chanting daimoku], or they otherwise tried to impose Japanese customs or ways of doing things in Japan with complete disregard for members’ circumstances. The Daishonin says that when people insist on adherence to rigid teachings, “They do injury to the faith of many believers” (MW-4, 13).

I couldn’t agree more. It is impossible to lead vast numbers by coercion and unreasonable means. Movements in which such means are used do not last long. Instead of making it possible to achieve kosen-rufu, such tactics only alienate people and cause them to desert the organization.

In conclusion, we should always, and in all matters, consider what will be the best way of proceeding with a view to the happiness of the country and the happiness of its people. This is the spirit of Buddhism. This is the spirit of Shakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin.

The light of Buddhism shines in those who possess wisdom that is flexible and that accords with common sense. Such people possess faith that is truly strong.

Praying that all of you will have a wonderful day, I conclude today’s speech. Please share the spirit and atmosphere of Kansai with members throughout Japan and around the world. Thank you very much for today! □

Catalyst Questions

1. Under what circumstances, if any, do you allow yourself to skip gongyo in place of daimoku?
2. How do you feel when you choose not to do gongyo? Why do you feel that way?
3. In what ways do you think it’s okay to adapt the practice of Buddhism to one’s own cultural background and in what ways is it not?

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