

JUNE
Study of Nichiren Daishonin's writings
The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra

**The following excerpt from The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin
is material for the SGI-USA study meetings in May and June.**

THE character *myo* [from Nam-myoho-renge-kyo] is rendered in Sanskrit by the word *sad*, and in Chinese is pronounced *miao*. *Myo* means “fully endowed,” which in turn has the meaning of “perfection.” Each word and each character of the Lotus Sutra contains within it all the 69,384 characters that compose the sutra. To illustrate, one drop of the great ocean contains within it the waters of all the various rivers that flow into the ocean, and the wish-granting jewel, though no bigger than a mustard seed, is capable of showering down all the treasures that one could wish for.

To give another analogy, plants and trees are withered and bare in autumn and winter, but when the sun of spring and summer shines on them, they put forth branches and leaves, and then flowers and fruit. Before the preaching of the Lotus Sutra, the people in the nine worlds were like plants and trees in autumn and winter. But when the single character *myo* of the Lotus Sutra shone on them like the spring and summer sun, then the flower of the aspiration for enlightenment blossomed and the fruit of Buddhahood emerged.

(The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 3, p. 15)

(Gosho Zenshu, [The Collected Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, in Japanese], p. 944)

Background

NICHIREN Daishonin wrote “The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra” on January 6, 1266, while staying at Seicho-ji temple in Awa, the province of his birth. He was 44 at the time. The word *daimoku* from the title refers to the title of the Lotus Sutra, *Myoho-renge-kyo*, but in Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, it is the invocation of the Mystic Law—Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Not much is known about the letter’s recipient except that she was an elderly woman who lived in Amatsu of Awa Province and had considerable attachment to the Pure Land teaching. The Pure Land sect was one of the major Buddhist sects of the time that the Daishonin had challenged as leading people to misery.

Upon receiving news of his mother’s serious illness in the autumn of 1264, one year after he was pardoned from exile on Izu Peninsula, Nichiren Daishonin returned to Awa to care for her. In November of the same year, a group of Pure Land sect zealots led by Tojo Kagenobu, a local steward, ambushed the Daishonin and his followers at a place called Koma-tsubara. Kudo Yoshitaka and others came rushing to his aid. Kagenobu’s men cut down Yoshitaka and another disciple named Kyonin-bo. The Daishonin received a sword cut on his forehead and had his left hand broken.

Despite the enmity from the local steward, Nichiren Daishonin remained in Awa until 1267, spreading his teaching. His mother recovered from her illness before she passed away in 1267, as he later recounts: “When I, Nichiren, prayed for my mother, not only was her illness cured, but her life was prolonged by four years” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 230).

He wrote this letter to elucidate the benefit people gain from chant-ing Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith in their own Buddha nature. He explains that people can rid their

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lives of negative karma and gain fortune and virtue because the Mystic Law, as represented by the character *myo*, produces three beneficial results. It enables people to “open” their lives and draw forth their innate Buddha nature; to see their lives “fully endowed” with everything they need to become happy; and to “revive” their lives to the state of Buddhahood. In this issue, we are studying the portion of “The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra” in which Nichiren Daishonin explains the two meanings of *myo*—to be fully endowed and to revive.

Commentary

IN the first paragraph of this excerpt, Nichiren Daishonin explains the meaning of the character *myo* as “fully endowed.” Linguistically, the phrase *Nam-myoho-rence-kyo* consists of two parts: *nam* and *myoho-rence-kyo*. *Nam* is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word *namas*, meaning devotion. *Myoho-rence-kyo* is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese translation of the title of the Lotus Sutra rendered by Kumarajiva (344–413), the renowned Buddhist scholar from Central Asia. He translated a number of Buddhist scriptures, including the Lotus Sutra, into Chinese during the Later Ch’in dynasty. The title of the Lotus Sutra in Sanskrit is *Saddharma-pundarika-sutra*—“the sutra of the mystic law of the lotus flower.”

As Nichiren Daishonin explains in this passage, the original Sanskrit for *myo* or mystic is *sad*. Here the character *myo* represents the Mystic Law of *Nam-myoho-rence-kyo*, which is the basis of the entire sutra. He states: “Each word and each character of the Lotus Sutra contains within it all the 69,384 characters that compose the sutra.”

In “The True Object of Worship,” he explains:

The Muryogi Sutra states: “[If you embrace this sutra,] you will naturally receive the benefits of the six *paramitas* without having to practice them.” The “Hoben” chapter of the Lotus Sutra says: “They wish to hear the teaching of perfect endowment.” The Nirvana Sutra states: “*Sad* indicates perfect endowment.” Bodhisattva Nagarjuna comments: “*Sad* signifies six.” The *Daijo Shiron Gengi Ki* (Annotation of the Four Mahayana Theses) states: “*Sad* connotes six. In India the number six implies perfect endowment.” In his annotation of the Lotus Sutra, Chia-hsiang writes: “*Sad* means perfect endowment.” The Great Teacher T’ient’ai remarks: “*Sad* is a Sanskrit word, which is translated as *myo*.” An arbitrary interpretation of these quotations may distort their meaning, but in essence they mean that Shakyamuni’s practices and the virtues he consequently attained are all contained within the single phrase *Myoho-rence-kyo*. If we believe in that phrase, we shall naturally be granted the same benefits as he was. (MW-1, 64)

FROM one perspective, the Mystic Law may be described as life itself. So when Nichiren Daishonin says that the meaning of the Mystic Law is “fully endowed” or “perfection,” he tells us that our lives are innately endowed with everything we need to become happy and free, exactly the same as the Buddha’s life. Those who believe in this truth and chant *Nam-myoho-rence-kyo* can embody this truth as reality. The key is our faith that we possess within our lives “the wish-granting jewel” from which we can enrich our lives.

In the second paragraph, Nichiren Daishonin talks about the meaning of *myo* to

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revive. He reassures us that no matter how hopeless our circumstances may appear, once we embrace the Gohonzon, we can tap our innate power to revive ourselves.

When we are ignorant of life's rejuvenating power, we become like withered plants in winter. We may be alive physically, but we are dead in spirit. But once exposed to the sun of the Mystic Law, our lives blossom into luxuriant trees, bearing the fruit of happiness. Our difficulty is believing we possess such power when confronted with the day-to-day problems that produce the illusion we are weak and limited. □

Background and Commentary by SGI-USA Study Department

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Introduction to The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin

The following is an edited excerpt from the introduction to The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, volume one. It explains some of the historical and cultural background of the Daishonin's writings and problems faced in translation.

JOSEI Toda, the second president of the Soka Gakkai, conceived the idea of publishing Nichiren Daishonin's writings to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the founding of the Daishonin's Buddhism in 1253. In 1951, Nichiko Hori (1867–1957), who had devoted his life to compiling and cataloguing the Daishonin's works and who served as fifty-ninth high priest of Taiseki-ji temple, began work on the editing of *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (Jp. Nichiren Daishonin *Gosho Zenshu*). In April of the following year, the completed text was published in one volume by the Soka Gakkai in Tokyo.

The authenticity of all of the 426 documents in the collection has been established. Of these, 150 exist in Nichiren Daishonin's own handwriting. Taiseki-ji has thirty-two manuscripts and others are the property of other temples or are in private collections visited by Nichiko Hori. Where no manuscript attributable to Nichiren Daishonin exists, the copies of the work made by his immediate disciples Nikko Shonin (1246–1333) and Nichimoku Shonin (1260–1333) were relied upon wherever possible.

The writings of Nichiren Daishonin fall into several categories. Some are formal treatises on Buddhism with large numbers of quotations from Chinese doctrinal works and translations of sutras. Examples of such treatises are the "The Security of the Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism" and the "The True Object of Worship." These treatises are written in classical Chinese, which, like Latin in Europe until recent centuries, was widely employed in Japan for works of history, philosophy and religious doctrine. Nichiren Daishonin's writings in classical Chinese are marked by great power and fluency.

OTHER writings by Nichiren Daishonin take the form of letters to his various disciples and followers. Some of these are lengthy and detailed, giving us much valuable information on the Daishonin's activities and thinking. Others are short communications written to advise or encourage his followers. These works are written in the ordinary Japanese epistolary style of the Kamakura period. Like the works in Chinese, they show Nichiren Daishonin to have been a master of prose style and contain passages of great warmth and beauty.

The treatises, since they are carefully constructed and logical in presentation, pose relatively few problems of interpretation, though occasionally there are quotations whose sources have yet to be identified. But because classical Chinese is very concise in expression, and because much of the language of the treatises is highly specialized, it has at times been deemed advisable to expand the wording of the original in translation in order to make the meaning clear in English.

The letters, written in a more intimate and personal style, present greater difficulties of interpretation. Whereas the treatises were intended as formal documents to be handed down to posterity, the letters are in most cases rather private communications between the Daishonin and his followers. They take for granted a familiarity with certain background information that was known to the writer and the recipient but in many cases cannot be fully known to us today. Thus, without a thorough knowledge of the circumstances under which the letter was written and the

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identity of the recipient, we must often guess at the exact meaning of references in the text.

Nichiren Daishonin in his letters and other writings frequently alludes to various anecdotes taken from Buddhist texts or works of Chinese history. Such allusions may appear pedantic to the English reader because of not having the cultural background to understand them. But it should be kept in mind that the Japanese readers whom Nichiren Daishonin was addressing would have encountered no such difficulty. The anecdotes he refers to would have been as familiar to them as the stories of the Bible or Greek mythology are to Western readers, and they could therefore immediately grasp the significance of the allusion and appreciate its aptness without difficulty.

ALL personal names are given basically according to their respective nationalities, but fictitious names that appear in the sutras are given in Japanese fashion. All Sanskrit names—personal, local and technical—are introduced without the elaborate diacritical marks demanded by strict Indology. Nearly all such names and terms, however, are listed in the appendix sections with full diacritical marks, along with their Japanese equivalents. All Japanese personal names are given in traditional fashion, with the family name first and the given name second. Thus, Minamoto no Yoritomo is Yoritomo of the Minamoto family. Sometimes the second element in a name is an official title rather than a given name. For example, in the name Shijo Kingo, Shijo is the family name and Kingo the title of the government office held by the individual. Each individual selection is accompanied by a background section that gives readers the information they need to understand that particular translation.

A FINAL word should be added concerning the form of dates found in the English translation. For the sake of readability, these are given as though they were dates in the modern Western calendar. Thus, for example, the date of Nichiren Daishonin's birth is given as February 16, 1222. In premodern times, however, Japan, like China, generally recorded dates in terms of the lunar calendar, and the date of the Daishonin's birth in fact is the sixteenth day of the second lunar month of 1222. By the lunar calendar, New Year's Day, which was regarded as the beginning of the first month and of spring, varied from year to year, but always fell somewhere between January 21 and February 19 by the Western calendar. For this reason, the sixteenth day of the second lunar month would actually correspond to a date in March or April of the Western calendar. Because the months of the lunar year are shorter than those of the solar year, it is necessary to add an extra month at certain intervals to prevent the lunar year from falling behind the solar year. Such a month is known as an intercalary month and occurred regularly about one month out of every thirty.

And finally, according to the traditional Japanese way of reckoning ages, a baby is one year old at the time of birth, and a year is added to its age with the passage of each New Year's Day. □

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