

Questions & Answers on Faith
Why Do Some Gohonzon Have Fewer Characters?
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Q: The Gohonzon transcribed by the 26th high priest, Nichikan, now conferred by the SGI, does not have some of the characters that appear on the Gohonzon transcribed by the former high priest Nittatsu or Nikken. Why?

A: Through his many writings, we know that the Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon so each of us could perceive the Buddhahood at the core of our lives. The Gohonzon he bestowed on his believers were not uniform in the peripheral characters they contain, even though they all reflect the same unchanging reality that exists eternally within us.

“Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, Nichiren” inscribed down the center of the Gohonzon embraces all ten worlds, that is, all life in the universe. (The ten worlds are represented by noted Buddhist figures inscribed on the remainder of the Gohonzon.) In other words, the potential to manifest a perfect state of life at any moment, in any of the ten worlds, is expounded in the phrase at the center of every Gohonzon.

SGI President Ikeda discusses the Gohonzon in his “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra,” saying:

The treasure tower [Nam-myoho-enge-kyo] stands at the center of the universe. In brilliance it is like a gathering of all the jewels in the universe. Its magnificence metaphorically indicates that the life of each person is a cluster of jewels. Its immense size illustrates the truth that each person’s life is as vast as the universe. (March 1997 *Living Buddhism*, p. 26)

And the Daishonin writes in “The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon”:

Dwelling in the Gohonzon are all the Buddhas, bodhisattvas and great saints, as well as the eight groups of sentient beings of the two realms who appear in the first chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Illuminated by the five characters of the Mystic Law, they display the enlightened nature they inherently possess. This is the true object of worship. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 212)

Based on the idea that all peripheral characters on the Gohonzon are “illuminated by the five characters of the Mystic Law,” the Daishonin used great latitude in selecting the characters he inscribed. For instance, the “eight groups of sentient beings of the two realms” actually never appear on any Gohonzon, even though the Daishonin says he regards them as being there. And, for another instance, among some 120 Gohonzon the Daishonin personally inscribed, two-thirds do not include Devadatta, representing Hell.

The Nichikan Gohonzon being bestowed by the SGI does not include Devadatta, Ashura, representing Anger, or the Wheel-Turning Kings, indicating Humanity. These are familiar to many SGI members as they appear on Gohonzon transcribed by Nittatsu and Nikken. (Incidentally, Ashura and the Wheel-Turning Kings do not appear on about half the Gohonzon that Nichiren Daishonin inscribed.)

It seems that because the doctrinal basis of the Gohonzon — the mutual possession of the ten worlds — was so clear in the Daishonin’s mind, he took the liberty to alter the peripheral characters from Gohonzon to Gohonzon. This tradition has obviously continued. The law of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo allows all beings to attain enlightenment — this was the Daishonin’s central message in inscribing the Gohonzon.

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