

Questions & Answers on Faith: Why Follow Buddhist Formalities?

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Q: How important is it to follow Buddhist formalities?

A: Adhering to Buddhist formalities in itself is not the purpose of Buddhist practice. But in following them, we often have a tool to help us practice.

The purpose of Buddhist practice is simply to change our lives for the better. And Buddhism is talking about real change — fundamental change in our lives. SGI President Ikeda pointedly describes this in the beginning of *The Human Revolution*: “A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of all humanity.”

Changing our life-condition is a constant battle against our inner weakness. It takes serious heart and spirit to challenge ourselves — something way beyond formality. So if we practice Buddhism only out of formality, out of force of habit, fundamental change within our lives cannot be effected.

For instance, take gongyo—the format of five prayers in the morning and three in the evening. Following this format alone is not the purpose of doing gongyo. Expressing our appreciation to the Mystic Law, renewing our determination for kosen-rufu, revitalizing ourselves, elevating, expanding and enriching our lives and solidifying our inherent Buddhahood: This is the purpose of reciting the Lotus Sutra and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

At the same time, because many SGI-USA members have developed the discipline to undertake the morning and evening format of gongyo, the practice of it has taken roots in our daily lives. If we had taken Buddhist formalities more lightly, many of us may never have mastered gongyo.

Unfortunately, some of us have developed a guilty conscience from taking Buddhist formalities too rigidly, like feeling “out of rhythm” if we miss gongyo. Not only is such guilt unhealthy, but it is something that people who do not chant never have to feel.

In other words, one’s life-condition can become lower than that of people who don’t even chant because of “Buddhist guilt”! Of course, when we set a goal to do gongyo and miss it, resetting the goal is healthy. Self-challenge is healthy, but guilt is not.

Nichiren Daishonin states in “The Gift of Rice”: “Even common mortals can attain Buddhahood if they cherish one thing: earnest faith. In the deepest sense, earnest faith is the will to understand and live up to the spirit, not the words, of the sutras” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 268). “Earnest faith” here can be construed to mean sincerity, the “spirit of the sutras” to mean substance and the “words of the sutras” to mean formalities. Our sincerity is what ultimately counts; really changing our lives — the substance of Buddhist practice — is what we should seek in faith.

And since we can often reach this substance through the discipline of fulfilling formalities, we can think of formalities as a tool.

Formalities are like a glass, while substance is like the water contained in it. We don’t drink the glass, but it would be hard to drink the water without it.

It is our challenge to put Buddhist formalities into this perspective, developing our faith by fulfilling their intent. “Those who strengthen their faith day by day and month after month are genuine practitioners,” President Ikeda recently said. “Our daily practice of gongyo, therefore, is important, as well as attending meetings every month.... Buddhist practice is a succession of such untiring efforts, the ultimate goal of which is attaining the summit of Buddhahood.”

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