

Daimoku Filled With Appreciation
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It seems to me that during the 11 years I have practiced this Buddhism, I have almost always been involved in some campaign. At first, during what I think of as the “New Members’ Honeymoon,” chanting daimoku was sort of like playing a new and exciting game, a game played for benefits, which I usually won. The benefits were mostly material and conspicuous: a lead role in a play and, greatest of all, the ability to find, and actually buy, my own house!

After a while, though, the game seemed to lose its edge. Actually, it was I who lost mine. I was so busy enjoying the gifts of my newfound good fortune that I found I had less and less time or energy to devote to my practice or to the seemingly nonstop activities my seniors kept encouraging me to join.

Did I say “encouraging”? Often, it felt more like a thinly disguised command! As if I would be expected to pay back the Gohonzon and the organization for the goodies I’d received! I did not see why I should go driving around to chant at the community center or other people’s homes, when I could chant as much (or little) in the freedom of my own house! Not to mention the obligatory propagation campaigns, in the mall or down the street, as we tried to introduce people to Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. I would follow the leader, smiling but wishing I were somewhere else.

All too soon I discovered, to my chagrin, that the fortune I had been taking for granted was as changeable as clouds in a windy sky. My play ended its limited engagement and nothing else came along. The benefit, though I was not yet ready to see it that way, was that I had more time to chant, perfect my gongyo, even begin to enjoy the activities somewhat. The energy my daimoku often lacked seemed to multiply in the presence of the friendly, optimistic members and leaders I grew to like, respect and love.

Then, just as fortune seemed to be coming my way again, my world fell apart. I lost my speech, and with it the only career I’d ever had. My practice became one long campaign; a life-or-death struggle for the only thing I felt was worth fighting for; a cure!

Through the nearly seven years since then, I have begun more campaigns than I have finished. There was one for 10 million daimoku, which took a lot longer than I expected. Another time, a senior leader suggested I double the amount of daimoku I was doing to four hours a day.

I kept it up for about three months, until I began to grow impatient. I never seemed to have time to do anything else. It seemed as though my relationship with the Gohonzon was being tainted by impatience and a creeping resentment. I went back to two hours a day, and that feels like a healthy medium, for now.

My relationship with the Gohonzon resembles, in many ways, my relationship with the man I love and have lived with for the past 20 years. By this I mean that there is a constant balancing, conscious or not, between positive and negative attitudes and emotions; from trust to doubt, from appreciation to complaint, from total love and respect to suspicion and jealousy. If this seems to diminish my reverence for the Gohonzon, it is not meant to. After all, the Gohonzon represents not only the vastness of the universe, but the tiniest fragment of energy or matter that makes up our bodies and minds.

Meanwhile, although I was hardly paying attention, benefits kept piling up. Material and physical problems seemed to melt discretely away, and any new ones that turned up never seemed to last. I learned, among many other things, that the quality of my daimoku doesn’t depend on its quantity, except insofar as the longer I chant, the more my mind and heart

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seem to see clearly what I need to do. Five intense, heartfelt minutes can sometimes do more than an hour of less focused prayer. But the other 55 minutes may have been necessary for those five to come.

As for challenging myself when I don't want to chant, my life-condition tells me what to do. When the problem is only laziness, it's fairly simple. If, on the other hand, I'm unwilling to face my own thoughts, then I have to take action. I may remind myself, as vividly as I can, of the awful suffering that brought me to the Gohonzon on the worst days. That memory strikes terrible fear in me. Reliving the awfulness, I remember how daimoku calmed it and drove it out of my heart. The daimoku of helpless misery becomes daimoku of freedom, relief and, above all, appreciation for the Gohonzon and for my life.

A few months ago, when I least expected it, my major obstacle began to ease. My speech began, unevenly but surely, to improve. Imagine the joy of hearing a normal, ordinary voice reply to a casual greeting, and knowing that it's mine!

"How're you doing?" the cashier says, in the mechanical tone she'll use a hundred times that day.

"Great!" I answer, and she glances up, not knowing why, but pleased at the joy in my voice. "Sure is a gorgeous day," I throw in for the sheer pleasure of hearing it, and we smile at each other warmly.

Now my daimoku, filled with appreciation, resounds loudly and most clearly throughout the universe.

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