

The Gohonzon: Treasure Map of Life
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The Gohonzon, in a sense, can be compared to a map pointing to the location of the supreme treasure of life and the universe — the Mystic Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. This treasure map tells us that the treasure is found within our lives. To those who can understand the map, it is not just a piece of paper but an invaluable object equal in value to the “treasure,” that is, life’s supreme condition and potential itself. To those who fail to grasp its message, however, the map’s worth will be reduced to that of a mere scroll.

As Nichiren Daishonin says: “As for the characters of the Lotus Sutra [the Gohonzon], a blind person cannot see them at all. A person with the eyes of a common mortal sees them as black in color. Persons in the two vehicles see them as void. Bodhisattvas see various different colors in them, while a person whose seeds of Buddhahood have reached full maturity see them as Buddhas. So the sutra states: ‘If one can uphold this [sutra], he will be upholding the Buddha’s body’” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 112).

How then can we correctly understand this map and locate the treasure it leads to? The Daishonin encourages us, “When you chant the Mystic Law and recite the Lotus Sutra, you must summon up deep conviction that Myoho-renge-kyo is your life itself” (MW-1, 4). Nichiren Daishonin teaches us, in other words, that one’s life is the greatest treasure itself. Hence he also writes: “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (MW-1, 213). This realization is what Buddhism calls the condition of enlightenment.

To convey his message, the Daishonin used the theory of a life-moment possessing 3,000 realms, especially the mutual possession of the ten worlds, as a basis for the Gohonzon’s graphic image. Down the center of the Gohonzon is written “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo – Nichiren” (Nos. 1 and 2 respectively on the chart, p. 12). This illustrates the oneness of the person and the law, or that the Daishonin’s life itself embodies the Mystic Law, as he writes, “The soul of Nichiren is nothing other than Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (MW-1, 120). It also indicates that our lives are fundamentally one and the same with the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, as the Daishonin demonstrated through his life.

Put another way, the inscription of “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo — Nichiren” tells us that we have the identical qualities of the original Buddha’s life. To the degree we strive for kosen-rufu and pray with the same desire as the Daishonin, we will manifest the same courage, hope and wisdom. This is what the Daishonin meant when he wrote: “You, yourself, are a true Buddha who possesses the three enlightened properties. You should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with this conviction” (MW-1, 30).

To the left and right of “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo — Nichiren” are various Buddhist figures that represent the ten worlds in the life of Nichiren Daishonin. The Daishonin included them on the Gohonzon to indicate that even the Buddha’s life inherently contains the lower nine worlds.

By writing “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo — Nichiren” prominently down the center with the other, smaller characters around it, the Daishonin graphically indicated that the figures representing the lower nine worlds are illuminated by the Mystic Law, as the Daishonin writes: “Illuminated by the five characters of the Mystic Law, they display the enlightened nature they inherently possess. This is the true object of worship” (MW-1, 212). In other words, these figures signify the nine worlds when they are based upon Buddhahood.

How the ten worlds are represented on the Gohonzon varies. On some Gohonzon each of

the ten worlds is represented by a separate character or characters found in the Buddhist scriptures. On other Gohonzon, however, the ten worlds are represented as groups, like the four noble worlds. The Daishonin used both styles, as did later high priests.

The Nichikan-transcribed Gohonzon

On the Nichikan-transcribed Gohonzon, the ten worlds are represented in two groups: the four noble worlds (Buddhahood, Bodhisattva, Realization and Learning) and the six lower paths (Heaven, Humanity, Anger, Animality, Hunger and Hell).

On the Nichikan Gohonzon, the four noble worlds are indicated by Shakyamuni Buddha (No. 8) and Many Treasures Thus Come One (No. 9), who both represent Buddhahood, and the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth — Bodhisattva Superior Practices (No. 10), Bodhisattva Boundless Practices (No. 11), Bodhisattva Firmly Established Practices (No. 6), and Bodhisattva Pure Practices (No. 7).

The lower six worlds are represented by figures indicating Heaven, Animality and Hunger. Heaven is indicated, for instance, by the Four Great Heavenly Kings — Great Heavenly King Hearer of Many Teachings (No. 4), Great Heavenly King Upholder of the Nation (No. 13), Great Heavenly King Increase and Growth (No. 27), and Great Heavenly King Wide-Eyed (No. 33) — and Great Heavenly King Sun (No. 20), Great Heavenly King Moon (No. 16), Great Heavenly King Stars (No. 15) and the Devil King of the Sixth Heaven (No. 19).

Animality is indicated by Eight Great Dragon Kings (No. 22), and Hunger is indicated by Mother of Demon Children (No. 25) and Ten Demon Daughters (No. 24).

Other Characters

T'ien-t'ai (No. 26) and Dengyo (No. 23) represent those who transmitted the true lineage of Buddhism in the past.

The native gods of India, Great Heavenly King Indra (No. 17) and Great Heavenly King Brahma (No. 18), are incorporated into the Gohonzon as Buddhist gods. So, too, are the gods native to Japan, Sun Goddess (No. 31) and Great Bodhisattva Hachiman (No. 28).

Two names are written in medieval Sanskrit, or Siddham. They are the Buddhist deity Ragaraja (No. 14), which represents the principle of earthly desires are enlightenment, and the Buddhist deity Achala (No. 21), which represents the principle that the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana.

Also inscribed on the Gohonzon is a declaration by the Daishonin that reads, “Never in the 2,230 years since the passing of the Buddha has this great mandala appeared in the world” (No. 32).

Demonstrating the law of causality on the Gohonzon are the two Buddhist promises — “Those who make offerings will gain good fortune surpassing the ten honorable titles [of the Buddha]” (No. 5) and “Those who vex and trouble [the practitioners of the Law] will have their heads split into seven pieces” (No. 12).

Arrangement of the Gohonzon

The graphic arrangement of the Gohonzon is based on the concept of the Ceremony in the Air depicted in the Lotus Sutra. The 11th or “Emergence of the Treasure Tower” chapter depicts the appearance of a magnificent tower: “At that time in the Buddha’s presence there was a tower adorned with the seven treasures, five hundred *yojana* in height and two hundred and fifty *yojana* in width and depth, that rose up out of the earth and stood suspended in the air” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 170).

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One *yojana* is said to be the distance the royal army could march in a day. According to one interpretation, 500 *yojana* would be equal to the radius of the earth. The Treasure Tower was closed when it first emerged, but Shakyamuni opened it when he was invited by Many Treasures Thus Come One, who appeared to validate Shakyamuni's teachings, to sit with him in it. This is how the Ceremony in the Air begins.

Regarding the Treasure Tower, the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, says: "Within our lives exists the magnificent state of life beyond our comprehension called Buddhahood. This state of life or its power defies our imagination; nor can our words express it. However, we can concretely manifest this state in our lives. To explain that our lives can manifest the latent Buddha nature as a concrete reality is the ceremony depicted in 'The Emergence of the Treasure Tower' chapter."

In other words, the appearance of the Treasure Tower is a metaphor for the magnificent Buddha nature in our lives. In the Lotus Sutra, the opening of the closed doors of the Treasure Tower represents the transition from a theoretical explanation of Buddhahood as a potential state to the actual manifestation of the Buddha nature in each person.

On the Gohonzon, "Nam-myoho-rence-kyo — Nichiren" corresponds to the Treasure Tower. Shakyamuni Buddha and Many Treasures Thus Come One are seated in the tower facing the audience. The rest of the bodhisattvas, deities and various beings are facing these two Buddhas. In India, important persons are usually seated to the right. That Shakyamuni is placed to the left of "Nam-myoho-rence-kyo" as we face the Gohonzon and Bodhisattva Superior Practices (the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth) to the right means that Shakyamuni is facing out from within the Treasure Tower and Bodhisattva Superior Practices is facing him.

The Gohonzon diagram published along with this article will help you see the position and meaning of each inscription on the Nichikan-transcribed Gohonzon. It is hoped that explaining the graphic components of the Gohonzon will make it easier for you to sense the meaning of Nichiren Daishonin's message to all humanity — that every individual is potentially a Buddha, that everyone can attain Buddhahood by practicing to the Gohonzon.

We can compare the graphic image of the Gohonzon to each of our lives. Living in such a defiled age as the Latter Day of the Law, our lives can be easily dominated by the lower life-conditions, such as Anger or Animality — when this happens it is just like putting those worlds in the center rather than Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

Our lives are just like the Treasure Tower, but they may be closed and buried deep in the earth of delusion. Our challenge, therefore, is to bring the hidden Treasure Tower up from within the soil of our fundamental darkness and open it, establishing Nam-myoho-rence-kyo in the center of our lives and illuminating our lower life-conditions — putting them in their proper places.

What makes this possible is the power of faith and practice for oneself and others. It is our challenge to continue to practice to the Gohonzon with firm faith in its message that we are innately endowed with the supreme treasure. In this way, we can solidify Buddhahood as the basis of our life-condition, as exemplified by the arrangement of the Gohonzon.

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