

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE TEMPLE ISSUE Is the Nichikan Gohonzon 'Counterfeit'?

**Q: Why does Nichiren Shoshu claim that the Gohonzon issued by the SGI is “counterfeit”?**

A: This charge is an attempt by the priesthood to instill doubt and fear in members' hearts, and to exploit their faith in the Gohonzon. The Gohonzon issued by the SGI are not the SGI's own invention, nor are they counterfeit.

As mentioned before, in response to a proposal from Sendo Narita, the chief priest of Joen-ji, the SGI reproduced a Gohonzon transcribed in 1720 by Nichikan, the 26th high priest, and made it available to its membership. They are valid and authentic Gohonzon of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

The priesthood asserts that the Gohonzon issued by the SGI are “counterfeit” because: 1) they have not “been authorized by the high priest”; 2) they have not “received the legitimate ‘eye-opening’ ceremony”; and 3) they are “not issued by the head temple” (*NST News, Special Issue*, p. 9).

Nichiren Daishonin, in a letter known as “The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon,” 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. The Gohonzon is found in faith alone. As the sutra states, “Only with faith can one enter Buddhahood.” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 213)

Here, the Daishonin teaches us that it is our faith that taps the Gohonzon's power, power that is located within us. Nowhere in his writings does Nichiren Daishonin state that we need sanction from a high priest to benefit from our practice. Not even the Daishonin himself advocated that his sanction was necessary to achieve benefit or attain Buddhahood, as he wrote in “Reply to Nichigon-ama”:

Whether or not your prayer is answered depends upon your faith; [if it is not,] the fault in no way lies with me, Nichiren. (MW-5, 305)

The significance of “eye-opening” lies in “opening the eye of the Buddha” within us — in other words, in recognizing and revealing the Buddha nature within us. To this end, Nichiren Daishonin stresses faith in the Lotus Sutra, that is, the Gohonzon. The priesthood insists that the high priest must perform an eye-opening ceremony over the Gohonzon to empower it. However, the ritual known as the eye-opening ceremony is nothing more than a formality passed down from provisional, esoteric Buddhism. It has no relation to the essential spirit or practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism.

In some writings, the Daishonin refers to the eye-opening ceremony as applied to wooden and painted images, meaning Buddhist statues and the like. He is not talking about the Gohonzon in these passages and nowhere in his writings does he mention an eye-opening ceremony being necessary to empower the Gohonzon.

Most people in the Daishonin's day believed that such ceremonies gave power to statues of Shakyamuni Buddha and other Buddhist objects. In actuality, it had already become a popular source of income for priests, who collected offerings for performing such ceremonies.

For example, in “Consecrating an Image of Shakyamuni Buddha Made by Shijo Kingo,” the Daishonin encourages Shijo Kingo, who has just offered him a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha:

In performing the eye-opening ceremony for painted or wooden Buddha images, the

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only authority to rely on is the Lotus Sutra and the Tendai sect. (MW-6, 161)

By the *Tendai sect* the Daishonin is referring to the principle of a life-moment possessing 3,000 realms (*ichinen sanzen*), which explains that Buddhahood is inherent in all phenomena. By saying that the eye-opening ceremony must be based on the Lotus Sutra, the Daishonin debunks the idea that formal eye-opening ceremonies by priests are necessary and stresses faith in the Lotus Sutra, in other words, faith in the Gohonzon, as the key to summoning forth the state of Buddhahood.

He resolutely declares that our chanting daimoku with faith enables us to call forth the Buddha nature not only from within ourselves but from all phenomena. He further indicates that when it comes to the power of prayer, all people are equal, so long as they do not act against the intent of the sutra.

The priesthood's claim that the Gohonzon issued by the SGI are counterfeit because they are not issued by the head temple is unfounded. In the past, many Nichiren Shoshu branch temples reproduced Gohonzon transcribed by different high priests and issued them to their parishioners of their own accord, without the high priest's permission or an eye-opening ceremony performed by him. The priesthood's assertions are not only against Nichiren Daishonin's teaching but also inconsistent with its own history. And yet, recently, it published a document that reads:

One should never worship anything as a Gohonzon that has not been authorized as such by the High Priest, who has inherited the Heritage of the Law, even if it was inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin himself.... This has been a basic tenet of Nichiren Shoshu for seven hundred years. (From an NST-published translation of an article from a special issue of their Japanese-language publication *Daibyakuho*, c. Autumn 1993)

It is important to note that benefit from the Gohonzon derives neither from the high priest's permission nor an eye-opening ceremony but from our faith and practice in accord with the Daishonin's spirit.

#### *Five in a series*

#### **Key Points:**

- **The Gohonzon issued by the SGI is neither a counterfeit nor its own invention. It is based on a Gohonzon transcribed by Nichikan, the 26th high priest of Taiseki-ji. The temple's claim that this Gohonzon is counterfeit is intended only to create doubt and fear in people's hearts.**
- **We receive benefit through our practice to the Gohonzon, not through the high priest's sanction or his 'eye-opening' ceremony. It is solely due to our faith and practice in accord with the Daishonin's spirit.**

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