

Shakyamuni: Awakening to Our Mission
On the Gohonzon
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The Ceremony in the Air, as we read it in the Lotus Sutra, is a wonderfully poetic narrative that describes an event that took place in Shakyamuni's life more than 3,000 years ago. It is a description of Shakyamuni's own awakening to the reality of life and his mission to propagate the Law. And it is an explanation of what we, too, can experience as we practice to the Gohonzon.

For that reason, it's not enough to say that when Nichiren Daishonin inscribed Shakyamuni's name on the Gohonzon his point was to honor a prince born in India who founded Buddhism. Historically, Shakyamuni was a man whose behavior was exemplary — the Daishonin often points this out in the Goshō. Shakyamuni gave up a life of power and wealth to seek the whys of human suffering. He was a man known for his self-discipline, wisdom and compassion, who nurtured and taught his disciples for 40 years, then — unbelievably — told them to forget it all.

He then revealed the eternal aspect of his life — the function of Shakyamuni that appears on the Gohonzon.

SGI President Ikeda spoke of this point recently in "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra" (January 1998 *Living Buddhism*). He explained that the Shakyamuni who seated himself inside the Treasure Tower alongside Taho Buddha was Shakyamuni's true self.

Each day and evening, when we recite gongyo and chant daimoku, we have another opportunity to experience our own true, eternal self.

And first Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda's experience in prison offers us an example of this. "We can think of President Toda's enlightenment in prison as the moment in which he connected with his 'eternal self' as the leader of the movement to propagate the Mystic Law," President Ikeda said in the same "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra." "That was the meaning of his experience of being present at the Ceremony in the Air. What he awakened to in that instant was the unmistakable truth of life, the fundamental transcendent reality. Therefore, President Toda talked about the Ceremony in the Air as fact. And he said that all the members of the Soka Gakkai were also present there."

In "Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life," the Daishonin writes: "Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment countless aeons ago, the Lotus Sutra which leads all people to Buddhahood, and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from each other. Therefore, to chant Myoho-renge-kyo with this realization is to inherit the ultimate law of life and death" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 22).

Usually, it's when we face a huge obstacle — when we chant to the Gohonzon as though it were the last moment of our lives, as the Daishonin says — that we experience our true, our eternal self.

That's also when we understand the true heritage of the Law, passed on to us through the power of our faith directly in a flow that has existed throughout eternity. This is our awakening to the reality of life and our mission to propagate the Law.

Two in a series