

Discussions on Youth The Palace of Your Life

This is the 20th installment of a series of discussions on youth among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai high school division chiefs Hidenobu Kimura (young men's chief) and Kazue Igeta (young women's chief).

KIMURA: One student admitted being uncertain about how to pray to the Gohonzon; he wanted to know whether he should just chant about one thing at a time — waiting for that prayer to be answered before going on to the next one — or whether it was all right to pray for many things at the same time.

IKEDA: You can chant for as many things as you like. A person with many wishes and dreams should pray earnestly to fulfill each one. Buddhism is reason.

Use the analogy of shopping. You can buy many things when you have enough money in your wallet. To buy something that costs \$300, you need to have \$300. If you only have \$10, you can only purchase \$10 worth of goods. If you want to buy something, you need to bring along enough money to do so.

In faith, the same logic applies. You are the only one who can realize your desires; it's up to your own faith, not anyone else's.

IGETA: Some members say that they have trouble concentrating or focusing on the Gohonzon when they chant; they get distracted, and their minds wander. What can they do about this?

IKEDA: Being human, it's natural for our minds to wander, for all sorts of thoughts and memories to surface. You can share all those thoughts with the Gohonzon. There is no set form or pattern for how we should pray. Buddhism emphasizes being natural. Therefore, simply chant earnestly without pretense, just as you are. In time, as your faith develops, you'll find it easier to focus your mind when you chant.

KIMURA: Is it all right to chant mainly for ourselves?

IKEDA: Yes, it's fine. It's natural for prayers to center on your own desires and dreams. There's no need to pretend that you're praying for something lofty when you're not. You're only fooling yourself if you do. By chanting naturally, without affectation or reservation, for what you seek most of all, you'll gradually come to develop a higher and more expansive life-condition.

Of course, it's also fine to chant with the resolve to become bigger-hearted or for the welfare of your friends and for kosen-rufu — the happiness and prosperity of all humankind. You are free to chant for whatever you wish. It's all up to you.

Doing gongyo and chanting daimoku are not obligations. They are a wonderful right you possess.

IGETA: Toshiko Takeyama, young women's high school division chief of the Chugoku area, said that many students have asked her whether doing gongyo and chanting daimoku would really help solve their problems. One member in particular was very despondent. Apparently she had challenged a difficult problem by doing gongyo earnestly, but failed to

Title: The Palace of Your Life

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Author:

Keywords: Discussions Guidance Life News Palace Practice Prayer Tribune World Your Youth

make any headway. She began to worry that she might never solve her problem, and became lax in her practice of gongyo. She wanted to know where she was going wrong.

IKEDA: In Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, it is said that no prayer goes unanswered. But this is very different from having every wish instantly gratified, as if by magic. If you chant to win the lottery tomorrow, or to score 100 percent on a test tomorrow without having studied, the odds are small that it will happen.

Nonetheless, viewed from a deeper, longer-term perspective, all your prayers serve to propel you in the direction of happiness.

Sometimes our immediate prayers are realized and sometimes they aren't. When we look back later, however, we can say with absolute conviction that everything turned out for the best.

Buddhism accords with reason. Our faith is reflected in our daily lives, in our actual circumstances. Our prayers cannot be answered if we fail to make efforts appropriate to our situation.

Furthermore, it takes a great deal of time and effort to overcome sufferings of a karmic nature, whose roots lie deep in causes we made in the past. There is a big difference, for example, in the time it takes for a scratch to heal and that required to recover from a serious internal disease. Some illnesses can be treated with medication, while others require surgery. The same applies to changing our karma through faith and practice.

In addition, each person's level of faith and individual karma differ. By chanting daimoku, however, we can bring forth from within a powerful sense of hope and move our lives in a positive, beneficial direction.

KIMURA: So even if we don't get immediate results, the important thing is to persevere in our Buddhist practice.

IKEDA: It is unrealistic to think that we can achieve everything overnight. If we were to have every prayer answered instantly, it would lead to our ruin. We'd grow lazy and complacent.

KIMURA: Yes, it certainly makes sense that if all our prayers were immediately answered, we'd probably stop making any real effort.

IKEDA: You may have a passing interest in drawing, for example. But if you think you can simply dash off some paintings, suddenly hold an exhibition and have all your work snapped up by art collectors, you are hardly being realistic.

Suppose, rather than working, you have spent all your money playing and are now destitute. Do you think someone giving you a large sum of money would contribute to your happiness in the long run?

IGETA: No, it is only likely to aggravate the problem.

IKEDA: It would be like making superficial repairs to a crumbling building without addressing the problem at its root. Only by first rebuilding the foundation can you begin to build something solid upon it.

Faith enables us to transform not only our day-to-day problems, but our lives at their very foundations. Through our Buddhist practice, we can develop a strong inner core and a solid and inexhaustible reservoir of good fortune.

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There are two kinds of benefit that derive from faith in the Gohonzon: conspicuous and inconspicuous. Conspicuous benefit is the obvious, visible benefit of being protected or quickly able to surmount a problem when it arises — be it an illness or a conflict in personal relationships.

Inconspicuous benefit, on the other hand, is less tangible. It is good fortune accumulated slowly but steadily, like the growth of a tree or the rising of the tide, which results in the forging of a rich and expansive state of life. We might not discern any change from day to day, but as the years pass, it will be clear that we've become happy, that we've grown as individuals. This is inconspicuous benefit.

When you chant daimoku, you will definitely gain the best result, regardless of whether that benefit is conspicuous or inconspicuous.

KIMURA: That reminds me of the experience of the Kanagawa Joint Prefecture young men's high school division chief, Shuji Sasaki. It seems the turning point in his faith came when he was 17. He was working part-time for a butcher when he severed four fingers on his left hand while operating a meat saw. In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, his mother sat by his side, urging him: "You must chant. Daimoku is all we have now!" Surgeons worked on his hand for more than eight hours. Though they managed to reattach all four fingers, there was only a 50–50 chance that he would regain full use of his left hand.

For the first time in his life, he prayed to the Gohonzon with all his might. Upon his release from the hospital, all the members of his local Soka Gakkai district were waiting to greet him. Everyone had been chanting daimoku for him — all during the operation and throughout his stay in the hospital. At that time, he says, a fierce resolve welled up inside him to never part with the Gohonzon or turn his back on the warm and caring world of the Soka Gakkai. Mr. Sasaki eventually regained full use of his fingers. I think we can call his experience one of conspicuous benefit.

IKEDA: The support of our fellow members is a treasure.

No matter what happens, the important thing is to continue chanting. If you do so, you'll definitely become happy. Even if things don't work out the way you hoped or imagined, when you look back later, you'll understand on a much more profound level that it was the best possible result. This is tremendous inconspicuous benefit.

The true benefits of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism are of a lasting and inconspicuous nature that accrue in the depths of your life. Conspicuous benefit, for instance, might allow you to eat your fill today but leave you worrying about your next meal. As an example of inconspicuous benefit, on the other hand, you may have only a meager meal today, but you are steadily developing a life where you will never have to worry about having enough to eat. The latter is a far more attractive prospect, I think.

IGETA: Absolutely nothing is wasted in faith.

IKEDA: The more we exert ourselves in faith, the greater the benefit we experience.

Of course, it's possible to get by in life without practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism. But sometimes we are confronted by karma over which we seem to have no control, or are buffeted about because of an inner weakness. What a tragic loss it would be if we could never change ourselves, if we could never exclaim confidently at the end of our days what a wonderful life we've led. That is precisely why a guiding philosophy in life is essential.

My mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, said:

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Keywords: Discussions Guidance Life News Palace Practice Prayer Tribune World Your Youth

For what reason have we been born? As the Lotus Sutra passage “living beings enjoy themselves at ease” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 230) states, we have been born to enjoy ourselves. How dull it would be, then, if we did not do so! When we believe in the Gohonzon with all of our heart, we will savor a state of being in which life itself, and everything we do, is a source of joy.

President Toda used the term *absolute happiness* to describe the state of mind in which we can feel that life itself is a joy. If you persevere in faith, you will definitely come to experience this.

Our Buddhist practice boosts the power of our engine, strengthening our life force so that we can always declare, “I’m ready for anything!” When our engine is weak, even a small slope will leave us gasping and struggling painfully as we attempt to surmount it.

KIMURA: Obviously there are many fine, upstanding people in the world who don’t practice this Buddhism.

IKEDA: That’s very true. There are many people who demonstrate admirable integrity and character. It is a mistake to judge people merely on the basis of whether or not they practice the Daishonin’s Buddhism. Since there are so many wonderful people who are non-members, it simply means that those of us who are members should strive to develop our humanity and character all the more.

I hope you will forge friendships with people of character and integrity and humbly seek to learn from their example.

Nonetheless, no matter how capable or in control people might appear on the outside, it’s difficult to see what’s inside their hearts. Often people may look happy, but underneath they may be hiding some personal agony or grappling with a serious problem. Or though they may seem happy now, there is no guarantee that they will always remain that way.

When you get right down to it, does material wealth assure happiness? Does fame? Does living in a big house? The answer is an emphatic “No.” All the time we see people embroiled in bitter battles over money; people plunged into misery when fame and popularity disappear; people ruining their lives when they let fame and power go to their heads; and people living in large, luxurious homes where family members cannot stand one another and a cold and hostile atmosphere pervades.

Such things as money, fame and material possessions offer a fleeting satisfaction, something that can be called relative happiness. However, when we transform our lives internally, when we develop within ourselves a brilliant inner palace, then we can be said to have established absolute happiness. If we develop a state of mind as vast and resplendent as a magnificent palace, then nothing — no matter where we go or what we may encounter in life — can undermine or destroy our happiness.

The most fundamental issue all of us have to grapple with is death. Not even the greatest or smartest person on earth can solve the suffering of death inherent in the human condition. Only a correct practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism enables us to surmount the fundamental suffering of death and apprehend the eternity of life.

IGETA: Does our daimoku reach the deceased?

IKEDA: It does, indeed. Life is eternal. Suppose a person dies in pain and suffering. Even after death, that person’s life may remain in a state of suffering. It might be likened to someone moaning in his or her sleep due to a nightmare.

If you chant daimoku with that deceased person in mind, you can remove the suffering

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from his or her agonized life and impart ease and joy through the rejuvenating and illuminating power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. And since chanting is that powerful, there is no way that your daimoku cannot help move in the direction of happiness the lives of your parents and friends who are still with you.

Only Buddhism solves the fundamental sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death inherent in the human condition. These sufferings have remained essentially unchanged throughout human history, plaguing the ancient Egyptians as much as they do us in our technologically advanced world today. One reason why people around the world are seeking Buddhism so earnestly is that it solves the question of life and death.

The wonderful thing about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is that, through daimoku, the four sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death can be transformed into four castle walls or ramparts that fortify the palace of your life. Though it might be difficult to appreciate at first, the mud of our suffering provides the building material from which we can erect a solid bulwark for our palace of happiness within. The deeper the mire of suffering, the more indomitable a palace we can establish.

Youth, above all, is a time for laying the foundation for a truly magnificent palace of life.

IGETA: Yes. There are many people who have made their days in the high school division the foundation for their future. The Hokkaido young women's high school division chief, Kiyoko Oyane, struggled with relationship problems in her second year of senior high school, something that forced her to chant daimoku very seriously. Before that, she had done gongyo only when she encountered some problem, but hadn't really appreciated its value. As she pushed herself to chant daimoku, she came to learn through personal experience that when you change, others change.

So I think it's important for young people to learn the great benefit of daimoku while they're still in high school.

IKEDA: Chanting daimoku establishes a foundation of good fortune in young people's lives. If you establish a solid foundation now, there is no limit to the structure you can build upon it later. Many things contribute to building that foundation. Diligent application to one's studies helps, as does exercising to develop physical fitness and stamina.

But our inner state of life lies at the core of our mental and physical well-being. Buddhist practice is the only means by which we can strengthen, purify and develop our inner life.

We have to exercise our minds through study. We have to exercise our bodies through physical activity and sports. We also have to exercise our life-condition through daimoku. When our inner condition of life changes, our minds and bodies also change. They will be refreshed and revitalized.

Daimoku charges our batteries. If we take care to regularly charge our batteries, then we'll always be full of energy and vitality. If we fail to keep our batteries charged, we won't have energy when we need it most and as a result may be defeated by our environment.

Those who saturate their lives with daimoku and learn to keep their batteries charged while they're young are building a foundation for lifelong happiness.

KIMURA: Satoru Sato, young men's high school division leader of the Shin'etsu area, said that he didn't do gongyo until his second year of high school. He was the captain of his school's boxing team. When he reached the national high school finals, he gained the conviction that anything could be achieved if one simply made the effort.

But in the winter of his second year in high school, he suffered a slipped disk and was

Title: The Palace of Your Life

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Author:

Keywords: Discussions Guidance Life News Palace Practice Prayer Tribune World Your Youth

told by the doctor that he could no longer box. He fell into a serious depression; the light had gone out of his world and nothing seemed to matter to him anymore.

Then, a young men's division leader in his area started coming by to encourage him, telling him confidently: "Nothing is impossible with faith. Things will definitely turn around, you'll see." With this encouragement, Mr. Sato gradually applied himself to the practice of gongyo and daimoku. He recovered from his slipped disk and the following summer again qualified for the national finals.

IGETA: The encouragement of people close by can be a great source of strength for those who are suffering.

If I may change the subject slightly, a student was wondering whether it's necessary to kneel when we do gongyo and chant daimoku. She says that her legs grow sore and numb when she sits that way, and she can't concentrate on chanting.

IKEDA: It's perfectly all right to sit in a chair or, if you sit on the floor, to arrange your legs comfortably.

It's important to want to sit before the Gohonzon as though going to meet the original Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin, and that daimoku and gongyo be enjoyable. Bearing these points in mind, what's most important is that you continue in your Buddhist practice throughout life. There's no need to be overly concerned with formality.

KIMURA: A member asked about closing our eyes while chanting or doing gongyo.

IKEDA: It's best to keep your eyes open and to look at the Gohonzon. It's generally considered impolite not to look others in the eye when speaking to them. I think this is also true when we are facing and addressing the Gohonzon as we do gongyo or chant daimoku.

Of course, if you do close your eyes occasionally, there's no need to worry. We should just bear in mind that when we close our eyes, it can be more difficult to commune strongly with the Gohonzon.

This, of course, does not apply to people who are blind or sight impaired, who need simply chant or do gongyo to the Gohonzon within their hearts.

KIMURA: Where specifically should we direct our gaze when looking at the Gohonzon?

IKEDA: Wherever is most natural for you is fine. You can look at the characters of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* down the center, or you can gaze at the entire Gohonzon.

As long as we chant with strong faith, our prayers are fully communicated.

IGETA: Why is it that we face east for the first prayer of morning gongyo?

IKEDA: During morning gongyo, we face east to greet the sun, which represents all the universal functions that protect those who exert themselves in faith — functions that we normally refer to as Buddhist gods in the Daishonin's Buddhism. However, we do not pray to the sun itself.

These universal functions, if you like, are nourished by *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. They are vitalized and energized by daimoku, strengthening their protective force and influence. In a figurative sense, during our first prayer of morning gongyo we offer these Buddhist gods or protective functions an opportunity to savor the flavor of the Law.

When we offer daimoku in reverence, the Buddhist gods respond to us in reverence. That

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Author:

Keywords: Discussions Guidance Life News Palace Practice Prayer Tribune World Your Youth

is, the protective functions of the universe and the protective functions in our own lives mesh and begin to act in harmony.

When we turn to face the Gohonzon again for the second prayer, all the Buddhist gods throughout the universe join us in offering greetings to the Gohonzon. The Buddhist gods — protective functions — are thus set in motion toward the realization of our prayers.

KIMURA: The first prayer is important, isn't it? When we don't have time to do a full morning gongyo, is it OK just to face east and chant daimoku?

IKEDA: Yes, in that case, just chanting daimoku is fine.

IGETA: Would you please explain the significance of the prayer beads?

IKEDA: It is customary to place the prayer beads around the middle fingers of both hands — the three tufts on the right hand and the two tufts on the left — twisting the loop so that it crosses over between our two hands. The prayer beads are said to be fashioned after the human body: The three tufts on the right are our head and both arms; the crossing over of the loop indicates our navel; the two tufts on the left are our two legs.

Each set of prayer beads comprises 108 beads, representing the 108 earthly desires, the sources of suffering. The four smaller beads in the loop stand for the four bodhisattvas, who are the leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the Lotus Sutra.

KIMURA: That would be bodhisattvas Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices and Firmly Established Practices.

IKEDA: Yes. Profound meaning is attached to each of these four bodhisattvas, but I won't go into detail now. Suffice it to say that the true identity of Bodhisattva Superior Practices is Nichiren Daishonin. The four bodhisattvas represent the power to work eternally for the happiness of all humanity.

The prayer beads therefore symbolize that through chanting and doing gongyo before the Gohonzon, we can transform all problems and suffering into fuel to propel us toward happiness.

Moreover, our joined palms represent the fusion of reality and wisdom — the fusion of our lives with the Mystic Law — while the meeting of the five fingers of both hands represent the mutual possession of the ten worlds. The mutual possession of the ten worlds means that none of the ten worlds — that is, Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity, Rapture, Learning, Realization, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood — are separate from one another. This is precisely why the power of the world of Buddhahood is manifested in the other nine worlds of our daily lives.

We should remember, however, that such things as prayer beads, Buddhist altars, incense and the like form part of the ritual aspect of faith. Such formalities are subject to change depending on the era or place, and in most cases change is acceptable.

The substance of our faith is what matters most.

Also, the dual nature of our practice — for ourselves and for others — will never change. Practice for ourselves constitutes chanting daimoku and doing gongyo with faith in the Gohonzon, while practice for others constitutes teaching others about the Mystic Law.

KIMURA: What does the term *Gohonzon* mean?

Title: The Palace of Your Life

Subject: World Tribune 03/06/98 n.3181 p.1 WT980306p01

Author:

Keywords: Discussions Guidance Life News Palace Practice Prayer Tribune World Your Youth

IKEDA: The literal meaning of *honzon* is object of devotion. *Go* is an honorific. Even people who declare that they are not religious will surely have something that they value or esteem most highly. Whatever people cherish most dearly — that is their object of fundamental respect, or object of devotion. Though they might claim otherwise, there are those for whom money is an object of devotion. For others, it might be social status. Some people make their boyfriend or girlfriend, or their family, their object of devotion. For some, knowledge is the altar at which they worship. And certainly there are people who venerate some deity or some vague concept of heaven or truth.

What you make the object of your greatest veneration will have a profound influence on your life. The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin takes as its object of fundamental respect the life of the Buddha — the eternal essence of life at one with the universe. That object of veneration is not something abstract or out of reach, because it is life itself. Nichiren Daishonin 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 Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 213).

The eternal life of the universe exists within each of us. The Gohonzon resides within each of us. The Daishonin’s Buddhism is a philosophy of utmost respect for human beings and for life. Nichiren Daishonin embodied the essence of his own life in the form of the Gohonzon to make it possible for us to summon forth the Gohonzon within our lives.

In a sense, there is no simpler Buddhist practice than doing gongyo and chanting daimoku. We do not have to undertake strange austerities as in some esoteric Buddhist traditions. With machinery, too, the more sophisticated the technology, the greater the ease of operation and use. Similarly, the very superiority of the Daishonin’s Buddhism enables us to tap the life state of Buddhahood through the very simplest form of practice.

However, since our Buddhist practice takes place in the midst of our daily lives, it is all too easy for us to grow lazy and neglect it. In that respect, there is perhaps no more difficult practice when it comes to continuing. Nonetheless, if we challenge ourselves to keep up a little each day, before we realize it we will have built a path to happiness in the depths of our lives; we will have established a solid embankment that will prevent our ever being swept away toward unhappiness.

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