

Questions and Answers on Faith: Why Do We Need the Gohonzon?

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Q: Why do we need an object of devotion like the Gohonzon?

A: The Gohonzon as a physical object helps us reveal our Buddhahood. It enhances our practice. But merely having or seeing a Gohonzon does not determine whether we are actually revealing our Buddhahood.

Before the advent of Nichiren Daishonin, Buddhist objects of devotion were wooden statues or pictures of Shakyamuni Buddha or other Buddhas or bodhisattvas. By contrast, in the Daishonin's Buddhism, the inner life-condition of the Buddha, not the external form of the Buddha's appearance as symbolized by statues, was reflected through Chinese characters on a paper mandala — the Gohonzon, our supreme object of veneration. The Law, the seed of enlightenment, is not found merely in a Buddha's physical characteristics. It is within his or her heart.

According to the Buddhist view of a life-moment possessing 3,000 realms, even an insentient object like a piece of paper has the potential to fulfill the function of Buddhahood — depending on what is written on it. In this vein, the Daishonin inscribed his own life-condition on the Gohonzon, thus attempting to share a life-condition where Buddhahood or the Mystic Law of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo illuminates every realm of an individual's life. In other words, he could inscribe the Gohonzon because he fully embodied the Mystic Law. This he proved through his behavior as the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law.

Buddhism expounds that our lives exhibit ten worlds: Buddhahood, Bodhisattva, Realization, Learning, Rapture/Heaven, Tranquillity/Humanity, Anger/Belligerence, Animality, Hunger and Hell. And that each of these life-conditions manifests itself according to our relationship with our immediate environment.

Therefore, our life-condition is influenced by the relationship that we create with our object of devotion. This relationship is crucial to our happiness.

As the Daishonin writes in "Letter to Horen": "As for the characters of the Lotus Sutra [i.e., 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 sees them as Buddhas. So the sutras 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).

We can take the Gohonzon as the Buddha's heart — and also as the supreme potential within our own heart. Our relationship with the Gohonzon is like our relationship to our own heart. Hence, the Daishonin states, "Never seek the Gohonzon outside yourself" (MW-1, 212).

The Daishonin tells us that when facing the Gohonzon "faith alone is what really matters" (MW-1, 246). In the same respect, he says to "believe in the Gohonzon with your whole heart" (MW-1, 120).

All in all, we practice to the Gohonzon to make our innate Buddha nature our regular basic life-condition. Attaining Buddhahood means to solidify our inherent Buddhahood to where it actually supports the other nine worlds all the time — the Gohonzon helps us to do so.

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