

WHAT A CONCEPT: FAITH
Entirely Different
By LISA JONES, Staff Writer

Faith is the most fundamental concept in Buddhism and perhaps the most difficult to define. In his writings, Nichiren Daishonin repeatedly stresses the primacy of faith. For example: “Faith alone is what really matters” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 246); “The Gohonzon is found in faith alone” (MW-1, 213); and “Faith is the cause for wisdom” (MW-6, 216).

It could be said that the Daishonin’s utmost desire is for us to have faith in the Lotus Sutra — that is, the Gohonzon, according to the Daishonin’s teachings — and in our own potential for Buddhahood.

But what is faith? A belief? A hope? A conviction?

In a sense, it’s all of this and more, including a will to trust, a desire to become absolutely happy and the underlying motivation of our every thought, word and deed. In his writings, the Daishonin uses for *faith* the word *shin*, a noun that means belief, trust or faith. He doesn’t analyze the word itself, which implies that he and his readers shared a common understanding of the term.

Generally, the Daishonin talks about faith in two ways: its function and its expression.

As a function, faith is the fundamental cause (and effect) of attaining Buddhahood. The Daishonin writes: “The one word — *faith* — is the seed of enlightenment” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 725); “The word *faith* is a sharp sword to cut the fundamental darkness” (ibid.); “Faith is the source of the way” (ibid., p. 97); “Faith is the mother of benefit” (ibid.).

He also asserts: “‘Knowledge without faith’ describes those who may be knowledgeable about the Lotus Sutra but do not believe in it. These people will never attain Buddhahood. Those of ‘faith without knowledge’ may lack knowledge but believe, and can attain Buddhahood” (MW-1, 260). This suggests that faith isn’t an intellectual exercise so much as a function of one’s heart. At the same time, Buddhism teaches that faith can be deepened through practice and study, suggesting that we can enhance our faith through intellect and conscious effort.

Ultimately, faith is developed through experience — by continually challenging ourselves and our circumstances, ever-deepening our understanding of and trust in the Gohonzon and our own Buddhahood.

In Buddhism, faith is expressed through human behavior. The Daishonin writes that “what we call faith is nothing extraordinary. As a woman cherishes her husband, as a man will give his life for his wife, as parents will not abandon their children, or as a child refuses to leave his mother, so should we put our trust in the Lotus Sutra...and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. This is what is meant by faith” (MW-5, 303). In other words, faith is not something supernatural that has to be bestowed on us by a religious authority, nor does it involve blind obedience.

Rather, faith can be understood in terms of ordinary human emotions and relationships. Further, one could say that faith in the Gohonzon is expressed through bodhisattva action — and where there’s bodhisattva action, there’s faith. While faith is, in this way, a simple thing, at the same time it’s perhaps too complex to address in 600 words.

As Josei Toda used to say, “To understand something intellectually is easy; but to grasp it through faith is entirely different.”

Thirteen in a series

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