

WHAT A CONCEPT: ‘Nam’
Impartial But Not Impersonal
By LISA JONES, Staff Writer

Nam, one of the components of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, means devotion — it means to apply ourselves in faith, practice and study with the seriousness and earnestness evoked by our bodhisattva vows. (For more on these vows, please see the “Bodhisattva” concept article in the June 19 issue.)

Nichiren Daishonin explains: “People place the word ‘Nam’ before the names of all deities and Buddhas in worshipping them. But what is the meaning of ‘Nam’? This word derives from Sanskrit, and means to devote one’s life. Ultimately it means to offer our lives to the Buddha” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 267)

In the Daishonin’s Buddhism, *nam* means to offer, or devote, our lives to the Gohonzon.

Elaborating on this, SGI President Ikeda once wrote that “*nam* is two-directional: that is, one aspect of *nam* is that we devote our lives to or fuse our lives with the ultimate, unchanging reality, while the other is that through this fusion, we are simultaneously capable of drawing forth an infinite wisdom....”

In other words, when we devote our lives to the Buddha, the Buddha is expressed through us; by devoting our lives to the Gohonzon, our innate Buddhahood becomes manifest in all our endeavors.

In Buddhism, devotion is synonymous with wholeheartedness. Halfheartedness, on the other hand, equals cowardice and is said to be an enemy of Buddhist practice. *Halfheartedness* means withholding from or not being ourselves in front of the Gohonzon, while *wholeheartedness* means exposing our true feelings to the Gohonzon and trusting in it without reservation.

In this regard, *nam* means putting all our eggs in one basket, so to speak: honestly discarding provisional teachings and employing the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before all others; entrusting our honor, our hopes and dreams, our very lives to the Gohonzon and, concurrently, to our own Buddhahood.

It could be said that the Gohonzon is impartial — it functions in strict accord with cause and effect — but it’s not impersonal. Rather, it’s the ultimate expression of the Daishonin’s compassionate, teacherlike, parental concern for each of us. Josei Toda used to say that we should be serious but not rigid in front of the Gohonzon. We should feel as if we’re actually in the Daishonin’s presence, but we should chant as we are, whether joyful, bored or sad.

Also, devotion to the Gohonzon does not mean that we subjugate our individuality to the “greater will” of the Daishonin. On the contrary, wholehearted prayer to the Gohonzon enhances and gives direction to our individuality.

It could be said, then, that *nam* implies mutual devotion — between us and the Gohonzon, between mentor and disciple, between the common mortal and the Buddha.

In *The New Human Revolution*, President Ikeda writes:

I’m sure some of you regard expressions such as...dedicating one’s life to Buddhism as encouraging a sort of self-sacrifice, some kind of tragic self-immolation. But the state of mind underlying the devotion I am talking about is entirely different. It is a state of complete, self-assured calm and peace, a state utterly without fear. It is a feeling as expansive and serene as the clear blue sky, a fullness of hope, joy and total satisfaction — a state of being ultimately free and true to oneself.

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