THE OBJECT OF DEVOTION— THE GOHONZON: ITS MEANING, WORDS AND IMAGERY

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One of the most debated issues regarding any religious object is whether it *is* sacred or *represents* the sacred. Put another way, is it an actual embodiment or symbol of what is to be revered in worship? Those questions about the nature of religious objects have played no small part in the history of religion.

The Iconoclastic Controversy in which Christians debated the merits of religious icons is considered the last step toward the great schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church in 1054.1

The interpretation of the Eucharist—the consecrated bread and wine used in Holy Communion—has been another source of doctrinal disputes in the Christian Church since the earlier Middle Ages, especially during the Reformation period. At the thirteenth session of the Council of Trent held in 1551, the Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed its doctrine of transubstantiation, asserting the conversion of the whole substance of the bread and wine into the whole substance of the Body and Blood of Christ, only the appearances of the bread and wine remaining after the consecration.2

The Protestants opposed this view. For example, Martin Luther claimed that after the consecration, the substances both of the Body and Blood of Christ and of the bread and wine coexist in union with each other.3 Ulrich Zwingli, on the other hand, affirmed that the Lord's Supper was primarily a memorial rite, and that there was no change in the elements whatever.4

As evident in the history of Christianity, religious objects often trigger tension and anxiety for those who think that the divine is beyond material expression. At the same time, people tend to seek something tangible as an object or expression of their devotion. Some people regard a sign of the divine as the divine itself while others reduce the significance of a sacred object to a ritual symbol devoid of its own spirituality. The nature of a religious object, in this way, is often at the center of theological debate and confusion in many religions.

Is the Gohonzon a Symbol or the Embodiment?

In the case of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, its object of devotion works as both symbol and embodiment. When people look at the Gohonzon5 for the first time, what do they see? What do they make of it? It is a scroll with unfamiliar inscriptions, but is it a religious icon or sacred formula? Whatever their reaction, it is difficult not to notice oriental calligraphic characters arranged in a specific pattern— though most have no idea what those characters mean or why they are arranged that way. As our first impressions of things often reveal some important insights into their nature, what most of us first notice about the appearance of the Gohonzon, that is, its written characters and their graphic arrangement,

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provides us with some clues to Nichiren Daishonin's intent in creating this object of devotion.

In one sense, the Gohonzon represents the Daishonin's enlightenment and, thereby, our innate Buddha nature. The Gohonzon is a symbol of all people's potential Buddhahood; it signifies something other than itself. This is why the Daishonin explains to his elderly disciple Abutsu-bo the meaning of his offerings to the Gohonzon — which is referred to as "the treasure tower" — as follows: "You may think you offered gifts to the treasure tower of the Thus Come One Many Treasures,6 but that is not so. You offered them to yourself. You, yourself, are a Thus Come One who is originally enlightened and endowed with the three bodies.7 You should chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with this conviction" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 299-300). Here the Daishonin explains that when we pray to the Gohonzon, the Gohonzon is pointing our attention to our own innate Buddha nature. The Gohonzon reflects our reverence back to our supreme inner potential. In this sense, the Gohonzon functions as a pointer to our Buddhahood; it is a symbolic representation. In the above passage, therefore, the Daishonin cautions us not to mistake the sign for the signified, which would externalize and objectify the Buddhahood that actually resides within us.

From another perspective, however, the Gohonzon functions as an embodiment of the Daishonin's enlightenment. The Gohonzon is not intrinsically a self-conscious, living entity embodying the Daishonin's enlightenment, but it functions in our practice *as if it were*. The Daishonin explains: "I, Nichiren, have inscribed my life in sumi ink, so believe in the Gohonzon with your whole heart. The Buddha's will is the Lotus Sutra, but the soul of Nichiren is nothing other than Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" (WND, 412). When we put our faith in the Gohonzon and pray to it in the spirit of this passage, the Gohonzon transforms itself from mere paper and ink into a concrete manifestation of the Daishonin's enlightenment in the reality of our consciousness. The Gohonzon thus works as an external stimulus that calls forth our inner potential of Buddhahood. On one hand, we know that the Gohonzon is a symbolic representation of our Buddha nature. In our practice, on the other hand, we pray to it as if it were the actual embodiment of the Daishonin's enlightened life so that we may gain confidence that the selfsame nature exists within our lives as well. Viewing the Gohonzon as the embodiment of the Daishonin's enlightenment is not simplistic make-believe, although the Gohonzon physically remains as paper and ink; it is the affirmation of our faith in the Daishonin's enlightenment and in our own enlightened potential. The Gohonzon, in a sense, serves on behalf of the absent Daishonin as a concrete example of attaining enlightenment.

The Gohonzon, in this way, helps our practice as both symbol and embodiment of Buddhahood. It must be noted, however, that the Gohonzon as an embodiment of enlightenment should not be taken to mean the mysterious presence of the divine in the inanimate object. The Gohonzon becomes an embodiment of Buddhahood through our faith and practice. In other words, the importance of the Gohonzon as the embodiment of the Daishonin's enlightenment is meaningful and real only to the extent that practitioners pray to it with faith and view it as an example to follow, not as an external saving force. The meaning of the Gohonzon as intended by the Daishonin, in this sense, is created through a dynamic interaction between the object of devotion and its devotee. The significance of the Gohonzon, therefore, would be incomplete without the practitioner's faith and practice.

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The Treasure Tower: the Imagery of the Gohonzon

The design of the Gohonzon dates back to the origin of Mahayana Buddhism, which took shape around the turn of the first century in India. In reaction to monastic Buddhism, which emphasized personal salvation through austerities, Mahayana Buddhists stressed the importance of altruism and the role of lay practitioners (i.e., bodhisattvas) to spread the teachings. The Mahayanists called their doctrine "Mahayana" or "the greater vehicle" to carry the masses to the shore of enlightenment while referring to monastic Buddhism as "Hinayana" or "the lesser vehicle." The popular Mahayana movement developed around the worship of *stupas* — mounds or towers originally built to enshrine Shakyamuni's relics. After Shakyamuni's death, which is dated by many scholars around the fourth or fifth century before the Common Era, his lay followers started to build these *stupas,* especially during the reign of King Ashoka (268-232 BCE), who was the third ruler of the Maurya dynasty and the first king to unify India. Many lay followers gathered around the stupas and paid homage to the Buddha, who was now absent.

The popularity of *stupa* worship is evident in the central role of the jeweled tower in the Lotus Sutra, one of the early Mahayana sutras, which is thought to have been compiled around the first century.[8] The Daishonin used the *stupa* or "treasure tower" from the Lotus Sutra as a chief graphic motif for inscribing the Gohonzon. Down the center of the Gohonzon is written "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Nichiren," which signifies his awakening to the universal law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo or Buddhahood. As he explains, "The treasure tower is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" (WND, 299), the Daishonin views the treasure tower depicted in the Lotus Sutra as symbolic of the Buddha nature inherent within the lives of all people. Thus he addresses one of his disciples as follows: "Abutsu-bo is therefore the treasure tower itself, and the treasure tower is Abutsu-bo himself" (WND, 299).

The inscriptions on both sides of "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Nichiren" on the Gohonzon depict the assembly of various living beings who gather around the treasure tower to listen to Shakyamuni's preaching as described in the Lotus Sutra. Some of them are not even humans, such as the dragon king's daughter who demonstrates her enlightenment. The diversity of this so-called Assembly in the Air in the Lotus Sutra reflects the nature of the early *stupa* worship, which was not limited to the elite priestly class but was open to people from all walks of life. These inscriptions on the Gohonzon represent the ten states of existence (i.e., the Ten Worlds): intense suffering and despair (Hell); insatiable desires (Hunger); selfish foolishness (Animality); arrogance and belligerence (Anger); transient calmness (Humanity); intense yet temporary rapture (Heaven); self-improvement (Learning); self-awakening to the partial truths of nature and humanity (Realization); altruism (Bodhisattva); and the indestructible state of happiness rooted in compassion and wisdom (Buddhahood). The Gohonzon graphically shows that each of these ten states of existence — when firmly grounded in the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo — exhibits its most positive functions to nurture one's life and happiness. For example, although we may find ourselves in the state of Hell, through our prayer to the Gohonzon, we can transform our intense suffering and despair into a source of strength and hope to overcome our difficulties. Incidentally, some ritual aspects involving our practice to the Gohonzon may be reminiscent of the *stupa* worship of the early Mahayana Buddhists. For example, the sounding of the bell may derive from the offerings of music often performed in front of a stupa. Other offerings to the Gohonzon may also be traced backed to early *stupa* worship, such as the offerings of flowers and incense as depicted in the Lotus Sutra.

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Words and Imagery: Subjective Universality

The mode of expression that the Daishonin chose for the imagery of the treasure tower is unique. He depicted the treasure tower and the surrounding assembly of various beings in written characters. While there are examples of pictorial depictions of the treasure tower or calligraphic religious objects that predate the Gohonzon,9 the Daishonin's imagery of the treasure tower depicted solely in written characters was rare if not unprecedented. His use of graphic characters follows the emphasis placed on scriptures in the Buddhist tradition. After Shakyamuni's death, stupas containing Shakyamuni's relics became objects of veneration among lay practitioners. Soon the pictorial and sculptural images of Shakyamuni and other imagined Buddhas, as well as bodhisattvas and Buddhist deities, were produced as religious icons. Furthermore, especially within the Mahayana tradition, greater emphasis was placed on scriptures, even to the point where people literally worshiped the scrolls of Buddhist texts. For example, in medieval India, the Wisdom (Skt *Prajnaparamita*) sutras became the objects of devotion among many Mahayana Buddhists.10 Regarding the religious importance of scriptures within the Mahayana tradition, Jacob N. Kinnard comments: "Relics and stupas are certainly worthy of veneration…but the book is more valuable and more valued, because the book is the source of the Tathagata's wisdom, and consequently the source of his attainment of enlightenment, and thus the source of the value of the relics."11

The Daishonin also often stresses the important role of written materials, particularly the Lotus Sutra. For example, he states: "The Lotus Sutra is both the teaching of the Buddha and the embodiment of the Buddha wisdom. If one puts sincere faith in each character and brushstroke in it, then one will become a Buddha in one's present form" (WND, 969). In refuting medieval Zen Buddhism, which rejected the role of Buddhist scriptures, the Daishonin states: "If one disregards written characters, what else could one regard as the Buddha's work?" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 153). He also writes: "Characters are the forms that manifest the minds of all living beings" (GZ, 380). The Daishonin's use of written characters as a medium for the Gohonzon reflects his strong belief in the role of written materials in communicating not only the material reality of things, but also the spiritual reality of humanity.

The Daishonin's use of the treasure tower's imagery as a graphic motif for the Gohonzon and his use of written characters as a medium of expression show his profound insight into the nature of religious worship. He seems to have understood how an image and a written text speak differently to our minds. In inscribing the Gohonzon as an image expressed in characters, the Daishonin unifies the specificity of a graphic image with the universality of written characters to convey the reality of the Buddha nature that is unique to each person and simultaneously universal to all people. The subjective yet universal aspect of the Buddha nature is at the core of the Daishonin's teaching, which promotes our awareness of the supreme potential not only in our lives but in the lives of others as well.

The Gohonzon is concrete in the sense that it depicts a specific image. But it is not a pictorial image of the treasure tower, Shakyamuni or Nichiren Daishonin himself. If the Gohonzon took such a form, it would be easy to view the Gohonzon as a depiction of someone else's life or an event far removed from our lives. If the Gohonzon were rendered as the Daishonin's image, for example, we might respect it, but we would not identify with it. For we simply don't look like a thirteenth-century Japanese monk! The Daishonin instead created the Gohonzon in characters to depict the specific imagery of the treasure tower from the Lotus Sutra, which symbolizes our innate Buddhahood. Written characters

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are suited to express universal concepts. But they are often abstract and lack a sense of immediacy. Images, on the other hand, are better suited to elicit personal responses from their viewers because they are more immediate to our senses. The Gohonzon, in terms of its graphic motif and calligraphic medium, is a hybrid of written and visual communication. Judging from the way the Daishonin chose to inscribe the Gohonzon, he probably intended it to communicate both conceptually and sensuously to our minds the universality of the Buddha nature and its immediacy to our lives.

Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, a German literary critic, explains the subjective yet universal nature of poetry as follows: "Poetry should become like the moon, which by night follows one wanderer in the woods from peak to peak and at the same time another from wave to wave and thus attends each, while it simply describes its great arc across heaven and yet ultimately draws it around the earth and around the wanderers also."12

Richter's analogy of the moon is fit to describe the functions of the Gohonzon. The Gohonzon illuminates the existence of Buddhahood for each practitioner. At the same time, the Gohonzon traces the orbit of enlightenment for all people to see. The Gohonzon — like the moon individually following all travelers on earth — sheds light on the innate Buddhahood in each of us.

The Daishonin's intent to make the Gohonzon's meaning universal to all people is also evident in the linguistic and cultural aspects of the Gohonzon. He used the words and personages of India, China and Japan to depict the Gohonzon.[13]

Two Buddhist deities are inscribed in a medieval Sanskrit orthography; Great Bodhisattva Hachiman comes from Japanese mythology, and there is the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, who established the Lotus Sutra's supremacy in medieval China. In medieval Japan, those three countries were viewed as the entirety of the civilized world. In other words, the Daishonin probably wished to make the Gohonzon universal in its language and content as well.

Some of the physical features of the Gohonzon suggest the Daishonin's minute considerations to make the object of devotion suited to the message that it carries to each and all practitioners: the personal yet universal reality of the Buddha nature. Of course, what is most important in our practice is the act of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon. The seemingly minor details of the Gohonzon, however, sometimes reveal much about the Daishonin's wisdom and compassion. The goal of this article is that knowing those details may help us become more aware of the Daishonin's intent behind his inscription of the Gohonzon and thereby pray more strongly and confidently.

1. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church.* 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. "Iconoclastic Controversy," pp. 815-16.
2. Ibid. "Eucharist," p. 567; "Transubstantiation," p. 1637.
3. Ibid. "Consubstantiation," p. 408.
4. Ibid. "Eucharist," p. 567.
5. The object of devotion in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is called the Gohonzon. "Go" is an honorific prefix, and "honzon" means an object of fundamental respect.
6. Many Treasures is a Buddha who appeared, seated within the treasure tower at the Ceremony in the Air, in order to lend credence to Shakyamuni's teachings in the Lotus Sutra.
7. Three kinds of body that a Buddha possesses, namely: (1) the Dharma body, which indicates the fundamental truth or Law to which a Buddha is enlightened; (2) the reward

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body, which indicates the wisdom; and (3) the manifested body, or the merciful actions of a Buddha to save people and the physical form that he assumes for that purpose. The three bodies are generally considered to be three different types of Buddhas, but in the Lotus Sutra they are shown to be the three aspects of a single Buddha ("Glossary," WND, 1275).

8. Nakamura, Hajime. *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1989. p. 186.

9. Stone, Jacqueline I. *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999. pp. 272-88.

10. Kinnard, Jacob N. *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism.* Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999. pp. 114-47.

11. Ibid. p. 119.

12. Richter, Jean Paul Friedrich. "School for Aesthetics." *German Romantic Criticism.* The German Library: Vol. 21. Ed. A. Leslie Willson. New York: Continuum, 1982. p. 45.

13. For the meaning of each inscription on the Gohonzon, see the "Diagram of the Gohonzon Transcribed by High Priest Nichikan" and "Further Explanation" in *Living Buddhism*, November 1997, pp. 16-17, pp. 19-24.

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