

**PERSPECTIVE
PRAYING FOR A GOOD EXPLANATION
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Selecting just the right 24 doughnuts at the local Dunkin' Donuts on an early wintry Sunday morning with a line of hungry parents and impatient children behind you can be a harrowing experience. Still, I had already chanted 30 minutes and was up to the challenge.

“No sprinkles (kids spill them on the carpet).”

“Yes, extra napkins, please!”

I pulled into our garage at 10 a.m., dropped the treats on the kitchen table and bolted up the stairs to our second-floor chanting room. This was a McLean/Tyson's Group meeting. About 15 members were vigorously chanting, including Julia's mother who was an SGI pioneer in Peru and had come to live with her daughter's family in America.

I was especially pleased to see a guest. I knew this must be Phil. He had called me the day before to invite himself to our meeting. He had recently returned with his family from India after a year-and-a-half assignment as an environmental consultant and had decided he wanted to embrace a daily Buddhist practice. He had read about the Soka Gakkai in a magazine article and looked for the SGI on the Internet. He thought the SGI-USA web site was very informative and liked what it said about the philosophy. He then called our community center and was referred to a local leader, who gave him my number. Congratulations, Phil, on sponsoring yourself! That's what I call a seeking mind.

As I watched a women's division member, Lil, point out gongyo to Phil, I worried about what a guest would think of the five silent prayers. Unfamiliar Buddhist concepts like *shoten zenjin* (Buddhist gods), Three Great Secret Laws, kosen-rufu and the True Buddha could be misleading or even disturbing if taken out of context. I also chanted very sincerely for some innovative way to explain the practice. I happened to look down at the sutra book in my lap and decided to see if I could use the five prayers of gongyo as a framework to share the fundamentals of our practice, philosophy and organization. I figured if I could survive Dunkin' Donuts on a Sunday morning, then maybe I could pull this off as well. Here's what I said:

As practitioners of the Nichiren school of Mahayana Buddhism, we chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo and also recite two chapters of the Lotus Sutra five times in the morning and three times each evening. The entire 28 chapters of this sutra represent the final and most important teachings of the first Buddha, or enlightened person, in recorded history. This man, who is sometimes called Shakyamuni or Gautama Siddhartha, lived in India about 2,500 years ago. Over the next two millennia, Mahayana Buddhism spread through Central Asia to China and then to Japan. As you just saw, we express our sense of gratitude and resolve as believers by performing one of five silent prayers each time we recite a section. I'd like to use each of these prayers to provide an explanation of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai.

First Prayer — Appreciation for and empowerment of the *shoten zenjin*

The first prayer expresses our appreciation for the *shoten zenjin*, the functions in our

lives and environment that protect us when we chant *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. Through exhaustive studies and internal realizations in turbulent 13th-century Japan, Nichiren Daishonin came to realize that the title of each chapter of the Lotus Sutra, *Myoho-renge-kyo*, is the essence of the Buddha's teachings. It is this natural Law that allows each human being to discover his or her fundamental identity as an enlightened being. By adding *nam*, or devotion to, he gave us a tangible means to express our own enlightenment in our daily lives through chanting these five characters.

This Buddhism is based on the reality that our surroundings are a reflection of our life. Through chanting, we can manifest our enlightenment. This causes both conspicuous and inconspicuous improvements in our environment in the same way our shadow straightens when we stand up. So it is our internal practice and faith that protects us, as opposed to an external god or supernatural force. Some philosophers have likened this process to returning to our spiritual center. We refer to this process of inner transformation as individual human revolution.

One of the interpretations of the word *kyo* is harmony. When we chant, we are more in rhythm with our environment—things seem to go our way more often. The Daishonin explained that a true philosophy should not only be historically and theoretically sound but must also provide actual proof in the lives of its believers.

Second Prayer – Appreciation for the Dai-Gohonzon

The scroll we chant to is called the Gohonzon. Each member of the SGI can receive a Gohonzon once they have established a solid daily practice. The original Gohonzon was inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin over 700 years ago so that his followers would have a specific object in their environment on which to focus. This Gohonzon was a physical manifestation of the Daishonin's enlightenment—his realizations about karma, gain and loss, and the eternity of life. The words *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* are written down the middle of the scroll. You'll have to take my word for that!

We offer praise to the Gohonzon in the second prayer. Obviously, in one sense this scroll is merely a piece of paper with Chinese characters on it. However, its significance lies in its profound representation of the enlightened potential that exists within each of us. So, as we use a mirror to enhance our physical presence, we use the Gohonzon to polish our spiritual selves and project the most attractive life-condition.

The Three Great Secret Laws aren't really a secret anymore. They refer to the invocation of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, the inscription of the original Gohonzon and the sanctuary where it is enshrined. More important to us, it refers to the fact that every human being has the potential for happiness in this lifetime and that we can sincerely pray to our own Gohonzon in our own homes and reveal the same enlightenment as Nichiren Daishonin. In other words, no priest or leader stands between enlightenment and us.

Third Prayer—Appreciation for the three teachers

In the third prayer, we express our appreciation for Nichiren Daishonin as well as his two main disciples, the second and third high priests without whose dedication we would not be able to chant today. The Daishonin underwent incredible persecutions and hardships to establish the foundation of this Buddhism. The many theses and letters he wrote to encourage and guide his followers provide a practical basis and foundation for his life philosophy and are still a relevant source of inspiration and guidance in the 21st century.

The second high priest, Nikko Shonin, set a shining example of a disciple's behavior.

He kept the true spirit of Buddhism alive by supporting his mentor, Nichiren Daishonin, and by sharing this practice with others. In turn, Nichi-moku, the third high priest, bravely remonstrated with corrupt government officials who felt threatened by the Daishonin's teachings of equality for even ordinary people.

Fourth Prayer — For the attainment of kosen-rufu and fulfillment of personal desires

The fourth prayer expresses our desire for kosen-rufu, or world peace, and our commitment to the continued development of the SGI in this endeavor. As a lay religious organization, we are dedicated to working with all people, including those of other faiths, to bring about a more peaceful world.

Because Nam-myoho-renge-kyo affects the deepest spiritual level of our lives, it affords us the power to lessen any negative effects that we might otherwise receive from causes we have made in the past. Slander of the Law, as used in this prayer, refers to actions we have taken that are incompatible with a life based on Buddhist compassion and wisdom. Over the years, our consistent practice enables us to overcome all adversity and establish a joyful life-condition.

Fifth Prayer — Appreciation for the first and second presidents of the Soka Gakkai and prayer for the deceased

A few years before the outbreak of World War II, Tsune-saburo Makiguchi, a Japanese educator, encountered Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and founded an organization of lay believers called the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai or value-creation education society. While the Nichiren Shoshu priests acquiesced to the demands of the militaristic Shinto government, Makiguchi and his disciple, Josei Toda, were imprisoned for their opposition to the war and for refusing to accept the state religion of Shinto.

Makiguchi died in jail. But at the end of the war, Josei Toda was released and became the second president of the Soka Gakkai. He dedicated his life to sharing this Buddhism so others could relieve their own suffering. The organization experienced tremendous growth in Japan before his death in 1958. Under the direction of the third SGI president, Daisaku Ikeda, this Buddhism spread further in Japan, even around the world. Today there are more than 12 million SGI Buddhists practicing in 148 countries.

Eventually, it became apparent that the priesthood had become very corrupt. They believed that they were more worthy of respect than the lay believers and insisted that the SGI members blindly follow them even when they were so obviously not practicing the Daishonin's teachings themselves. Their greed and egotism were actually leading people to unhappiness. About 10 years ago, we became the largest lay religious organization ever to be excommunicated. Since then, we have continued to practice and study the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin under the leadership and guidance of Daisaku Ikeda and to share the remarkable results of our practice with others.

It is difficult to grasp the true reality of our daily lives without facing the inevitability and meaning of death. In this prayer we also pray for the enlightenment of deceased relatives and other individuals. And, because Nichiren Daishonin taught us the interconnectedness of all human beings—that we can not truly be happy as long as there is a single person suffering in the world—we pray for the happiness of all humanity.

Phil thanked me for the explanation and some of the members suggested I share it with others through the *World Tribune*. We had a very warm and encouraging meeting and then

managed to polish off almost all the doughnuts without dropping a single crumb. I probably could have bought some with sprinkles after all.

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