

BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE

PRAYER IN BUDDHISM

Prayer is central to the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. SGI members often relate experiences of "offering earnest prayer," or "praying from the bottom of my heart." They also speak of having their prayers "answered." What do SGI members mean when they make such statements?

Webster's Third International Dictionary defines prayer as "a solemn and humble approach to Divinity in word or thought, usually involving beseeching, petition, confession, praise or thanksgiving."

In what ways does the Buddhist understanding of prayer accord with this definition, and how does it differ?

Prayer appears to be a universal human activity. There is evidence to suggest that humans have been engaged in some form of "prayer" since the earliest days of our species. As soon as humans developed a consciousness of their relative powerlessness before the forces of nature, the precariousness of their existence and their own mortality, they no doubt began giving expression to intense feelings of petition, praise or thanksgiving.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda has written that religion grew from prayer; that the sentiment and act of prayer precedes the forms that different religious traditions have since given this primordial human act. Buddhist prayer likewise may be thought of as a focused expression of these same sentiments of yearning, commitment and appreciation. It is, however, distinguished by the fact that Buddhism locates the divine within the life of the individual practitioner. The purpose of Buddhist prayer is to awaken our innate inner capacities of strength, courage and wisdom rather than to petition external forces.

Also, as in many Eastern spiritual practices, there is an emphasis on a specific physical form of prayer. For practitioners of the Lotus Sutra and the repeated chanting of the phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the name of the mystic law that lies within all life derived by the Daishonin from the title of the Lotus Sutra. That the chant is audibly intoned expresses that fact that in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism prayer is not a purely meditative turning inward, but an act making manifest inner qualities, bringing them out into the real world.

SGI members direct their prayer to the Gohonzon, or object of veneration. This is a mandala, a symbolic representation of the ideal state of Buddhahood, or enlightenment, in which all the tendencies and impulses of life—from the most debased to the most noble—function in harmony toward happiness and creativity. The Gohonzon is not an "idol" or "god" to be supplicated or appeased but a means for reflection and a catalyst for inner change.

SGI members are encouraged to make their prayers specific, concrete and focused on the real-life problems, hopes and concerns they confront. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism stresses the inseparability of "earthly desires" and enlightenment. The Daishonin states that it is by burning the "firewood" of our desires—through the act of prayer—that we are able to bring forth the flame of renewed energy and the light of our inner wisdom. Buddhist prayer is the process by which our intensely felt desires and sufferings are transformed into compassion and wisdom. In this sense, it inevitably involves self-reflection, including a sometimes painful confrontation with our own deeply rooted destructive tendencies. To quote Nichiren Daishonin again, "Your mastery of the Buddhist teachings will not relieve you of mortal sufferings in the least unless you perceive the

nature of your own life.”

Most fundamentally, prayer is the process of bringing forth the supreme state of life referred to as our “Buddha nature.” A potential possessed equally by all people, the Buddha nature is the fundamental, compassionate life force inherent in the cosmos. Prayer is the process of realigning our individual lives (the lesser self, with all its impulses and desires) with the rhythm of the living cosmos (the greater self). In doing this, we unleash previously untapped sources of self-knowledge, wisdom, vitality and perseverance. And because, in Buddhist philosophy, there is no separation between the internal world of human beings and their environment, changes that occur in our inner life are reflected in our external circumstances. The experience of having one’s prayers “answered” is the manifest result of this process.

Daisaku Ikeda has written that the ultimate form of prayer is in fact a vow—a vow to contribute to the happiness of others and the development of human society.

It is this vow and pledge to action that most profoundly attunes our lives to the larger life of the universe and brings forth our highest, most noble “selves.”

Courtesy of SGI Quarterly