

The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon



I HAVE received your offerings to the Gohonzon of five thousand coins, one horse-load of polished rice, and fruit. To begin with, this Gohonzon was revealed in the last eight years of the fifty that the Buddha preached in this world, and in this period of eight years, in eight chapters [of the Lotus Sutra], from the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter through the “Entrustment” chapter. Now, during the three periods following the Buddha’s passing, in the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law, not even the term “object of devotion of the essential teaching” yet existed. How then could the object of devotion have been revealed? Moreover, there was no one who was able to give it expression. T’ien-t’ai, Miao-lo, and Dengyo perceived it in their hearts, but for some reason never put it into words, just as Yen Yüan¹ realized the true meaning of Confucius’s teaching, but never gave it expression. Yet the sutra itself and the commentaries of T’ien-t’ai and Miao-lo explicitly state that the Gohonzon will appear after two thousand years have elapsed following the Buddha’s passing, in the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law.

How wondrous it is that, around two hundred years and more into the Latter Day of the Law, I was the first to reveal as the banner of propagation

of the Lotus Sutra this great mandala that even those such as Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, T’ien-t’ai and Miao-lo were unable to express. This mandala is in no way my invention. It is the object of devotion that depicts Shakyamuni Buddha, the World-Honored One, seated in the treasure tower of Many Treasures Buddha, and the Buddhas who were Shakyamuni’s emanations as perfectly as a print matches its woodblock. Thus the five characters of the Lotus Sutra’s title are suspended in the center, while the four heavenly kings are seated at the four corners of the treasure tower. Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are side by side at the top. Seated below them are the bodhisattvas, including Universal Worthy and Manjushri, and the voice-hearers, including Shariputra and Maudgalyayana. [Beside them are] the gods of the sun and moon, the devil king of the sixth heaven, the dragon king, and an asura. In addition, the wisdom kings Immovable and Craving-Filled take up their stations to the south and north. The evil and treacherous Devadatta and the ignorant dragon king’s daughter form a group. Not only the Mother of Demon Children and the ten demon daughters, who are evil demons that sap the lives of people throughout the major world system, but also the Sun

Goddess, Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, and the seven reigns of the heavenly gods and five reigns of the earthly gods, who are the guardian deities of Japan—all the various great and small gods, that is, the main gods, are ranged in rows. How then could the remaining subordinate gods be left out? The “Treasure Tower” chapter states, “[Shakya-muni Buddha used his transcendental powers to] lift all the members of the great assembly up into the air.”

Without exception, all these Buddhas, bodhisattvas, great sages, and, in general, all the various beings of the two worlds and the eight groups² who appear in the “Introduction” chapter of the Lotus Sutra dwell in this Gohonzon. Illuminated by the light of the five characters of the Mystic Law, they display the dignified attributes that they inherently possess. This is the object of devotion.

This is what is meant when the sutra says “the true aspect of all phenomena.”³ Miao-lo stated: “The true aspect invariably manifests in all phenomena, and all phenomena invariably manifest in the ten factors. The ten factors invariably manifest in the Ten Worlds, and the Ten Worlds invariably manifest in life and its environment.”⁴ It is also stated that the profound principle of the true aspect is the originally inherent Myoho-enge-kyo.⁵ The Great Teacher Dengyo said, “A single moment of life comprising the three thousand realms is itself the Buddha of limitless joy; this Buddha has forsaken august appearances.”⁶ Therefore, this Gohonzon shall be called the great mandala never before known; it did not appear until more than 2,220 years after the Buddha’s passing.

A woman who makes offerings to such a Gohonzon invites happiness in this life, and in the next, the Gohonzon will be with her and protect her always. Like a lantern in the dark, like a strong guide and porter on a treach-

erous mountain path, the Gohonzon will guard and protect you, Nichinyo, wherever you go. Therefore, you should take every care to ward off slanderers of the Law in the same way that you would never wish a courtesan even to come near your home. This is the meaning of “Thrust aside evil friends and associate with good companions.”⁷

Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. The body is the palace of the ninth consciousness,⁸ the unchanging reality that reigns over all of life’s functions. To be endowed with the Ten Worlds means that all ten, without a single exception, exist in one world. Because of this it is called a mandala. Mandala is a Sanskrit word that is translated as “perfectly endowed” or “a cluster of blessings.” This Gohonzon also is found only in the two characters for faith.⁹ This is what the sutra means when it states that one can “gain entrance through faith alone.”¹⁰

Since Nichiren’s disciples and lay supporters believe solely in the Lotus Sutra, honestly discarding expedient means¹¹ and not accepting even a single verse of the other sutras,¹² exactly as the Lotus teaches, they can enter the treasure tower of the Gohonzon. How reassuring! Make every possible effort for the sake of your next life. What is most important is that, by chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo alone, you can attain Buddhahood. It will no doubt depend on the strength of your faith. To have faith is the basis of Buddhism. Thus the fourth volume of *Great Concentration and Insight* states, “Buddhism is like an ocean that one can only enter with faith.” The fourth volume of *The Annotations on “Great Concentration and Insight”* explains this: “With regard to the phrase ‘Buddhism is like an ocean that one can

only enter with faith,' even Confucius taught that faith is first and foremost. How much more so is this true of the profound doctrines of Buddhism! Without faith, how could one possibly enter? That is why the Flower Garland Sutra defines faith as the basis of the way and the mother of blessings." The first volume of *Great Concentration and Insight* says, "How does one hear, believe in, and practice the perfect teaching to attain perfect enlightenment?" The first volume of *On "Great Concentration and Insight"* says, "To 'believe in the perfect teaching' means to awaken faith through doctrine and to make faith the basis of practice."

A non-Buddhist document relates that, because the emperor of Han¹³ believed his aide's report, the waters of a river froze on the spot. Another tells how Li Kuang, because he was eager to revenge his father, shot an arrow all the way up to its feathers into a boulder hidden in the grass. The commentaries of T'ien-t'ai and Miao-lo make it perfectly clear that faith is the cornerstone. Because the Han emperor believed

completely in his retainer's words, the river froze over. And Li Kuang was able to pierce a rock with his arrow because he fully believed it to be the tiger that had killed his father. How much more so is this true in Buddhism!

Embracing the Lotus Sutra and chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo in itself encompasses the five practices. It was this matter, the wonderful practice that includes the immediate completion of the five practices, that was transmitted to the Great Teacher Dengyo when he journeyed to T'ang China and met the Reverend Tao-sui. No other teaching is more important for Nichiren's disciples and lay supporters. It is referred to in the "Supernatural Powers" chapter.¹⁴ I will write again in detail.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The twenty-third day of the eighth month in the third year of Kenji (1277)

Reply to Nichinyo



Background

In this reply to Nichinyo, Nichiren Daishonin expresses his gratitude for her offerings to the Gohonzon and explains the significance of the object of devotion. The exact identity of Nichinyo is unclear. She is thought to have been either the wife of Ikegami Munenaka, the older of the Ikegami brothers, or a daughter of the lay priest Matsuno Rokuro Saemon, an earnest believer in Suruga Province. Judging from two letters the Daishonin sent her, she seems to have been a woman of good education and considerable affluence. Moreover, as the recipient of a Gohonzon, or object of devotion, she was evidently a

sincere believer. This letter contains a description of the Gohonzon that details the figures represented therein and their significance. The Daishonin also underscores the importance of faith in the Gohonzon.

In the first half of the letter, the Daishonin points out the rarity and importance of the Gohonzon. He cites the Lotus Sutra and other works to show that the Gohonzon is the embodiment of "the true aspect of all phenomena" and "the three thousand realms in a single moment of life."

In the second half, describing the great benefit of faith in the Gohonzon,

the Daishonin declares, “Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself,” adding that the Gohonzon is also found only in faith. Sharing two examples from secular tradition, the Daishonin reminds Nichinyo that faith is by far the most

important element in manifesting “the Gohonzon” in one’s life. He concludes by stressing that chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo with faith is the most complete form of Buddhist practice.

Notes

1. Yen Yüan (514–483 B.C.E.), also called Yen Hui, was one of Confucius’s most trusted disciples.

2. Beings assembled at the ceremony of the preaching of the Lotus Sutra. The two worlds—the world of desire and the world of form—are two divisions of the threefold world. The “eight groups” refers to the gods of the world of desire, the gods of the world of form, the dragon kings and their followers, the kinnara kings and their followers, the gandharva kings and their followers, the asura kings and their followers, the garuda kings and their followers, and the king of the human world (Ajatashatru) and his followers.

3. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

4. *The Diamond Scalpel*.

5. This statement is attributed to T’ien-t’ai, but its source has not been identified.

6. This quotation is said to derive from *The Treatise on the Secret and Sacred Teachings*.

7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

8. The ninth, or amala-, consciousness is the Buddha nature, or the fundamental purifying force, that is free from all karmic im-

pediments. Here the Daishonin is associating it with Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

9. The Japanese word for faith consists of two Chinese characters.

10. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

11. This phrase appears in chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra.

12. This phrase appears in chapter 3 of the Lotus Sutra.

13. Emperor Kuang-wu (6 B.C.E.–C.E. 57), the founder of the Later Han dynasty. Before becoming emperor, he was once defeated in battle. While retreating, he and his forces were cornered before a broad river. When his trusted aide, Wang Pa, falsely reported that the river was frozen and that they could cross it, the emperor-to-be believed his report and then found the river indeed frozen.

14. This presumably refers to a passage of the “Supernatural Powers” chapter of the Lotus Sutra that reads, “After I have passed into extinction, [one] should accept and uphold this sutra. Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way.”