

THE THREE GARMENTS

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THE GRAY ROBE



Nichiren Daishonin

USHI-TORA Gongyo is Gongyo chanted between the hours of the Ox (*ushi* - 1-3a.m.) and the Tiger (*tora*- 3-5a.m.). The hours between the Ox and the Tiger are a crucial time. It is at this time that life moves from negative to positive, and from death to life. It is the time when all Buddhas become enlightened. The 120 minutes between 2 and 4a.m. have three equal divisions. The first 40 minutes - the darkest part of night - represents death; the second 40 minutes falls between day and night, and life and death as night is transiting into day; and the last 40 minutes is the beginning of day, representing life. I begin Gongyo at 2:20a.m., the darkest part of the night. Since Daimoku is more important than Gongyo, I recite the sutra for 40 minutes, then chant ODaimoku for 50 minutes. My ODaimoku begins just as night

is transiting into day.

The robes worn by Nichiren Shoshu priests are neither black, representing death, nor white, signifying life. Nor are they red or orange, which are the colors of the sunrise. They are also not dark gray, which indicates nearness to death. They are a light gray, which represents the Middle Way (*chudo*) between life and death, between day and night. For it is the Middle Way that is the ultimate reality of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*.

It is very important to do morning Gongyo between the hours of the Ox and the Tiger even though the stars are still out.

The Prayer Beads - Juzu

If you put the *juzu* in your hands, even if you don't believe in this Buddhism, you have the same potential as a believer to become enlightened. This is because all life is equal.

The *juzu* represents the Law. The roundness of the beads symbolize the mystical cycle of life and the universe. The 108 beads of equal size in the body of the *juzu* represent 108 sufferings of human existence. The four smaller beads strung within the 108 beads represent the Four Great Bodhisattvas (Jogyo, Muhengyo, Jyogyo, and Anryugyo), signifying the four noble qualities of true self, eternity, purity and happiness. The two large beads at each end of the *juzu* indicate the two Buddhas, Taho and Shakyamuni, who represent two parents, as well as the principles of reality (all phenomena) and wisdom (the Law), respectively.



To hold the prayer beads correctly, place the end with two tassels on the middle finger of the left hand, twist the beads once in the middle and place the end with the three tassels on the middle finger of the right hand. Put your palms together and place them in front of your chest.

The White Surplice - Kesa

The short white surplice worn over the gray robe signifies that no matter how impure the world is, Buddhism is pure. The surplice has strips patched in by believers. Unlike the colorful surplices of other religions, which have multiple numbers of patches and strips, the surplice of Nichiren Shoshu has only 4 broad strips creating 5 divisions on the garment. The surplice is a small ornamental garment worn over the full-sized gray robe. It is smaller than those worn by priests of other religions because it is not worn to show off the person wearing it. After all, it is Buddhism that is important, not the person. The Law is higher than the priest; the priest is subordinate to the Law and supports the Law. The ornamental and showy surplices and robes of other sects emphasize the importance of the priest wearing them. By contrast, the simplicity of Nichiren Shoshu robes indicates that the emphasis is on the Law and not the person. The person is never higher than the Law.

Long ago the priests could not afford to have robes made, so lay women got together and patched the robes together. That is how the patches came to be in the surplice. In other religions the believers also made the robes for priests. Having received many donations the robes of these religions became ornate, colorful, and complicated with many strips and patches. In turn, the priests wearing those robes came to believe that they were more consequential than the law they represented.

The significance of the priest wearing the small, simple surplice is to demonstrate that the priest of Nichiren Shoshu is in service to Nichiren Daishonin's Law; it is not to bring attention to the priest. Wearing the *kesa* is a statement that the Law the priest represents is great and pure while he himself is insignificant.

Significance of the three garments

The three garments -- the gray robe, the white surplice and the prayer beads -- equal one. Known by the Buddhist term *sanne*, they represent the one vehicle of the True Law. Wearing these three garments is an indication that one has the right faith.

When the priest wears the robe and the surplice he is not only clothing and protecting his body from the elements, it also signifies that he protects the Law of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*. An individual can choose anything to wear to express

him- or herself. The priest wears the robe and surplice to express that he is a representative of the Law.

Just as the robe and the surplice cover the body, placing the prayer beads, which represent 108 human sufferings, between one's hands and chanting *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* is an act of enfolding the believer in the mantle of *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*.

In Christianity it is taught that if you believe in Christ your sufferings will disappear and you will be absolved of your sins. That of course is not true. The difference between Christianity and Buddhism is that if you believe in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, then you know that anybody can become enlightened, and everybody has the Buddha nature within them. Whereas Christians believe that if you commit sins you will go to hell and that's the end of it. In this Buddhism anybody - saints or sinners - can attain enlightenment because of the Buddha nature inherent in all life. Nichiren Daishonin wrote in "Reply to Hoshina Goro Taro," ". . .that teaching is judged supreme which enables all people, whether good or evil, to become Buddhas."