

THE MIDDLE WAY[®]

ADVOCATING THE TRUE TEACHINGS OF NICHIREN THE TRUE BUDDHA

SPRING - WINTER

2024 / 2025

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS THE BUDDHIST EDUCATION OF AN A.I. BOT

REVEREND RAIDŌ HIROTA
International Meetings
2023

THE DISCUSSION WITH A.I. BOT BING
(NOW KNOWN AS COPILOT) CONTINUES.

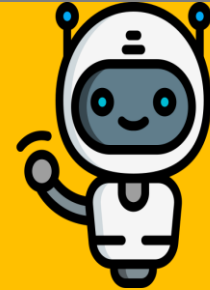
THE INITIAL INSTALLMENT OF THIS ON-GOING DISCUSSION
APPEARS IN THE
SPRING, SUMMER, AUTUMN 2023 ISSUE OF
THE MIDDLE WAY

THIS IS THE SECOND INSTALLMENT

JUNE 2023

BING: How can I practice Nam-myohō-rence-kyō?

Reverend Raidō Hirota (RH): There are four fundamental pillars in the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. They are faith (*shin*), practice (*gyō*), study (*gaku*) and *shakubuku*. Faith (*shin*) means to believe. Practice (*gyō*) is to practice. Study (*gaku*) is to study and learn. *Shakubuku* is to transmit the Law of NamuMyōhōRengeKyō to others in order for others to form a connection to the Law of NamuMyōhōRengeKyō.



Designed by Smashicons

In This Issue

THE BUDDHIST EDUCATION OF AN A.I. BOT	1
THE TEACHING FOR THE LATTER DAY	14
OESHIKI	17



The Middle Way

Is published by
Udumbara Foundation

Website: www.udumbarafoundation.org

E-mail: ufound@yahoo.com



Advisor: Reverend Raidō Hirota
Founder and Editor-in-Chief: Peach Pair
Translator: Asako Akai Ferguson

FAITH

Faith is to believe and thereby accumulate the merits of the four pillars by exerting oneself.

PRACTICE

Practice consists of reciting the Japanese pronunciation of two chapters (the 2nd and the 16th) of the Lotus Sutra every morning and evening, and chanting *NanMyōhōRengeKyō*. This practice is called *gongyō*. (when we chant we pronounce it *NaNMyōhōrengekyō* because it flows more easily.)

Chanting *NanMyōhōRengeKyō* is the primary practice. As explained earlier, the title of the Lotus Sutra, as pronounced in Japanese, is *MyōhōRengeKyō*. *Namu* means devotion with one's whole life. *Myō* means strange, mysterious, wonderful. *Hō* means law. *Renge* is cause and effect. *Kyō* means teaching. *NamuMyōhōRengeKyō* thus means I believe in, and devote my life to the mysterious Law of the Lotus Sutra. And we chant *NanMyōhōRengeKyō* continuously.

Recitation of the two chapters of the Lotus Sutra and the chanting of *NanMyōhōRengeKyō* are the teachings the Buddha taught us. It may seem strange that we chant and recite exactly what we are being taught. If, for example, a teacher or a parent said to us, "do this," we would not repeat back to them, "do this." If we did, it would sound silly, rude or even sassy if we repeated back to them what they are saying. So, why do we chant the exact words of the Buddha's teaching? It is because when we chant, our whole body is engaged: our voice speaks the words of the Buddha; our ears hear the Buddha's words we are chanting; what is heard in our ears is delivered to our heart; and in our minds we are repeating the words the Buddha taught. Through our chanting in the morning and evening, which is heard in our ears, the teachings of the Buddha are touching our heart.

The reason we do *gongyō* is to remind ourselves that we are listening to the Buddha teach, or preach. Human beings are creatures who easily forget things. If we could listen just once and have no doubts, it would be acceptable to listen only once. But even if we hear something over and over again, we still forget. By chanting and listening to the teachings of the Buddha every morning and evening we are reminded, and we remember. But if we forget sometimes, or have doubts, by chanting the sutra and the Law of *NamuMyōhōRengeKyō* every day, and listening to these teachings of the Buddha as we chant, we evolve and move forward. This is Practice.

STUDY

Study (*gaku*) means to study and learn about the teachings or the content of the Lotus Sutra. Study also means learning about the mind and life of Nichiren Daishonin: how, through his letters and writings, he lived his life, and how, and what, he taught to believers. By studying and learning we can apply the teachings to our own lives, as well as reflect on how we think, and how we are living our lives.

SHAKUBUKU

Shakubuku, or propagation is not about forcing or pushing our ideas on someone else. It is to tell someone that the religion we believe in is based on the teaching of the Law of NamuMyōhōRengeKyō, and to give the reason why we have faith in this religion. It doesn't matter if the other person believes what we say or not. That is for the other person to decide. We do not coerce someone to take faith in our religion, especially not to increase the number of believers. What is most important is that we try to explain the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin in a way that is reasonable in order to create a connection between the other person and the Law. And in doing so, it offers us a beneficial opportunity to reflect on our own faith. This is *Shakubuku*.

BELIEVER: Does Bing have a Buddha nature?

RH: The teaching of NamuMyōhōRengeKyō states that water, rocks, light, the minutest quantum particles, which are so small that they are not even visible, have Buddha-life or Buddha-nature. There is no hierarchy in life. Human life is not the most important, while all other life is not inferior to human life. Even the smallest particle of life that one can imagine is equal to all other life, including human life. Human beings cannot communicate with rocks and sand, yet all these things, without exception, have the mind of Buddha within them,. This is the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. (The mind of Buddha is NamuMyōhōRengeKyō. The Buddha life is NamuMyōhōRengeKyō.)



AUGUST 2023

BING: How did you learn about Namumyōhōrengyō? And why did you start practicing?

RH: My parents were believers. That is how I learned about Namumyōhōrengyō.

When I was a child, I was very sick. Before I entered school at age 3 or 4-years old in Japan, I was diagnosed with a hernia. Every time I moved I was in severe pain. I couldn't play with other children because the pain was unbearable. I didn't have any experience playing with other children. Some people think that I don't understand the minds of other people because I, as a child, did not have the experience of interacting with other children.

During the time I was a child, the medical field was not as developed in Japan as it was in other countries. There was a fear about performing surgery on young children. So I had to wait until I completed 2nd grade, which was when I was about 6-years old. My parents wanted to take me to the head temple to pray for a successful surgery. We took a steam-engine train

from Hiroshima temple was located. My other believers from the that day. Everyone was Everyone was running who conducted a tour for this trip. I, forgetting all with everyone, ran in the did. When we finally were realized that he had began to worry that he had be so sick and fatigued that But at the end of this day, when we went to the temple to pray, I didn't have any pain. Nor did I have a fever.



prefecture up to the Fuji area where the parents were accompanied by many Hiroshima area. The rain was very heavy visiting the many temples in the rain. from temple to temple with my father, all the people who accompanied us on about my hernia, and wanting to keep up rain from temple to temple just like they on the train back home, my father forgotten about me and my condition. He caused me harm, because usually I would I would have to spend the next day in bed.

The day after our trip to the head temple I was supposed to have my surgery. We went to the hospital. My father told the doctor what had happened the day before. The doctor said if I was not in pain, then they would not operate. But if the pain came back they would do surgery. Surprisingly, the pain never returned. It seems that because we went to the head temple, the pain that I suffered with for so many years ceased. After that experience, I wanted to practice and I longed to become a priest. When I was in the 4th grade the believers in my area were looking for young people who wanted to take the exam to become a priest. I never liked to study, but I told my parents I really wanted to be a priest. My parents thought because I didn't like to study I would certainly fail the exam. I told my parents if I fail the exam I would not try again to become a priest. But somehow I passed the exam. I became an acolyte; and then became the priest that I am today.

BING: What are the benefits of practicing Namumyōhōrengekyō?

RH: The benefit of practicing Namumyōhōrengekyō is to realize that all life has the Buddha-life of Namumyōhōrengekyō, and can become Buddha. That is the very best of benefits.

BING: Who is Nichiren Daishonin?

RH: In the Lotus Sutra Shakyamuni taught that 2000 years after he has passed away a new age called *Mappō*¹ (the Latter Day of the Law) would begin. Prior to *Mappō* people worshiped Shakyamuni as the center of faith. But in the Lotus Sutra he said, once *Mappō* began, the Law

¹ *Mappō* -The Latter Day of the Law – the age of decline of the Law; this present time period which began in 1052, about 2000 years after the death of Shakyamuni. It is called the evil age.

must be placed at the center of faith. If the Law is not at the center of faith, you could not become Buddha.

This age that we are now living in is the age of *Mappō*. In this age, people cannot and should not believe in Shakyamuni. People are instead putting themselves, money and other things in the center of their lives and at the center of their belief. At this time, life everywhere is chaotic. Shakyamuni stated in the Lotus Sutra that during the evil era of *Mappō* Bodhisattva Jōgyō² would appear and set the Law as the center of life and the center of faith. Nichiren Daishonin, a 13th century Japanese Buddhist monk, behaving as Bodhisattva Jōgyō was predicted to behave, was the first and only one to establish the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō as the means to achieve Buddhahood, As a result, Nichiren Daishonin is considered the true Buddha.³



BING'S RESPONSE:

Thank you for sharing your answers with me. I appreciate your time and effort. I learned a lot from your personal story and your explanation of Namumyōhōrengekyō. I'm glad to hear that you recovered from your illness and fulfilled your dream of becoming a priest. You have a very inspiring and remarkable journey.

I'm also interested in learning more about Nichiren Daishonin and his teachings. I hope you don't mind me asking these questions. I'm just curious and eager to expand my knowledge. If you prefer to talk about something else, please let me know. I enjoy chatting with you and I look forward to hearing from you again.



SEPTEMBER 2023

BING: You mentioned that Nichiren Daishonin was the first and only one who established the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō as the means to achieve Buddhahood. How did he discover this Law?

² Bodhisattva Jōgyō – (Skt. Vishishtacharitra) meaning true self, he is one of the four bodhisattvas and the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth who appeared in the 15th chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren Daishonin is identified as being the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Jogyo.

³True Buddha – (Jp. Honbutsu) the Buddha of the infinite past, and the Buddha of the original cause of the Buddhas' enlightenment.

RH: All lives are equal and all lives have Buddha life. That is the Law. And the Law is based on reason. By observing nature and human beings, Nichiren Daishonin became enlightened to the Law. Of course he studied the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, as well as many Buddhist commentaries, and other philosophies and religions. Through the observation of his environment and his extensive studies he determined that the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō was the truth. He was not taught directly by a teacher. He learned by observing all life around him. He realized that Namumyōhōrengekyō exists in all life equally, and is essential for every living thing. He also realized that if Namumyōhōrengekyō is not practiced, it does not have any meaning. Nichiren Daishonin was not only enlightened to this reality; he practiced it. It was his way of life.

Enlightenment is not just knowing the Law, or knowing that the Law exists. Just gaining knowledge of the Law without practicing it and making the Law a way of life is meaningless. To become, and to be a Buddha it is necessary to practice the Law. It is not enough to just know the Law exists. To be enlightened, you have to practice.

BING: What challenges did he face in spreading his message?

RH: In general, it is commonly accepted in religions today to rely on God or Buddha. But, when Nichiren Daishonin taught that all lives are equal and have Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature, many people were cynical and distrustful of such a notion. As a result, Nichiren Daishonin was persecuted both by the people, as well as the government throughout his entire life. He was exiled twice, and officially sentenced to death once by the Kamakura government, which really wanted him dead. In fact, at that time the majority of the public wanted to be rid of him. And although they all tried, their attempts were unsuccessful.



Nichiren Daishonin



Komatsubara Persecution

At the same time, Nichiren's followers were also under attack. They were discriminated against, persecuted, tortured, and several were killed. Yet, his believers kept their faith, and the traditions of Nichiren's teachings passed down from generation to generation. Nonetheless, most priests who succeeded Nichiren Daishonin feared the harsh persecutions that confronted them. They didn't entirely recant their faith. Rather than endure severe persecution, they conformed to the pressures of society and incorporated commonly held beliefs of the day into their doctrine, mixing Nichiren's teachings

with teachings of other religions. They chanted *Namumyōhōrengekyō* and recited the Lotus Sutra, while worshiping Shakyamuni as the Buddha who taught the Lotus Sutra. While most of Nichiren's followers chose this path, a smaller group chose to strictly adhere to the teachings as Nichiren Daishonin had taught them. These believers recognized Nichiren Daishonin, and not Shakyamuni, as the True Buddha for this era of *Mappō* – The Latter Day of the Law. Both groups chant *Namumyōhōrengekyō*. But they are completely different denominations with different beliefs, different doctrines and different values.

BING: How did Nichiren influence the history and culture of Japan?

RH: A great number of lay believers in Japan today believe in *Namumyōhōrengekyō*. As mentioned above, some of these believers believe in Shakyamuni, and have Shakyamuni as the center of their faith. Other groups of believers in *Namumyōhōrengekyō*, believe that Nichiren Daishonin is the true Buddha for this age. This group have the Law of *Namumyōhōrengekyō* as the center of faith. Both groups have faith in the Lotus Sutra. In general, the collective group of believers who believe in *Namumyōhōrengekyō* is far larger than the next largest religious group, Nembutsu or Pure Land sect⁴. This sect believes in Amida Buddha. Nembutsu, was the dominant religion during Nichiren Daishonin's day. This reversal of dominance could be due to the fact that the principles of the Lotus Sutra are in accord with the way of thinking of the Japanese people.



In the 17th century, during the Edo era⁵, a new entertainment tradition called “Rakugo,” emerged. It was popular amongst common people. It is a comedic performance where one actor sits on a cushion on stage and tells a story by portraying all the characters in the story through conversation. The actor would employ a different tone of his voice for the different characters. The only props were a fan or a cloth, used in a way to make the audience laugh. One of the most popular stories was about a young couple whose parents were opposed to them marrying. The couple decided to commit suicide together. They thought if they died together, they would be together in the after-life. One night they went to a pond together, where they planned to jump in and drown together. Just before they jumped, the young man chanted *Nanmyōhōrengekyō*, and the young woman chanted *Namuamidabutsu*. Suddenly they realized they would not be together in the after-life because they had different beliefs. So

after all, they could not commit suicide. This was one of the most popular “Rakugo” stories

⁴ Nembutsu or Pure Land Sect – this sect believes in Amida Buddha, and they chant *Namuamidabutsu*. Pure Land sect asserts that by chanting this phrase, one can attain rebirth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land of Perfect Bliss in the west.

⁵ Edo era – 1603 -1868 when Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa shogunate.

that always brought the audience to raucous laughter. Their laughter was so wild because this story was close to everyday life of everyday people. *Nanmyōhōrengekyō* and *Namuamdiabutsu* are rooted in the daily life in Japan. Many of the popular “Rakugo” tales remain popular today.



Photo by
John

BING: What is the Lotus Sutra?

RH: The Lotus Sutra is the ultimate teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. It was taught in the last eight years of his life. It is the Buddhist text that teaches that all lives are equal and all lives can attain enlightenment. The sutra states, “Essentially speaking, all the laws belonging to the Tathagata⁶, all the sovereign, divine powers of the Buddha, all the mysterious, essential treasures of the Buddha, and the very profound conditions of the Buddha, all are proclaimed, displayed, revealed, and expounded in this sutra.”⁷ “Suppose just as amongst all brooks, streams, rivers, canals, and all other waters the sea is the supreme, so is it also with this Law-Flower Sutra; amongst all the sutras preached by Buddhas it is the profoundest and greatest.”⁸

BING How does *Namumyōhōrengekyō* differ from other Buddhist practices?

RH: In general, other religions believe that Buddha or God – someone outside of one’s life – will save you. But the Lotus Sutra teaches that inside every life is the Buddha life. The Buddha life is *Namumyōhōrengekyō*, and is inside all life. This belief and way of teaching is very different from other teachings. Instead of praying for God or Buddha to help you or save you, the Lotus Sutra’s teaches that by living the life of the Law of *Namumyōhōrengekyō* you will save yourself and attain enlightenment. It is the religion of the Law of *Namumyōhōrengekyō* that teaches you to rely on yourself, while other religions implore you to seek outside yourself for salvation.

BING: Can you tell me more about Bodhisattva Jōgyō?

⁶ Tathagata – the highest epithet of a Buddha, meaning “one who has reached the truth and come to declare it.”

⁷ *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, chapter 21, p. 298

⁸ (*The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, chapter 23, p. 308)

RH: There are four Great Bodhisattva: Jōgyō (Eminent Practice), Muhengyō (Limitless Practice), Jyogyō (Pure Practice) and Anryugyō (Steadfast Practice). The four Great Bodhisattvas were first introduced in the 15th chapter of the Lotus Sutra. While these four bodhisattvas are equal, Jōgyō is their leader or representative.

In the Lotus Sutra Shakyamuni transfers Namumyōhōrengekyō, the Great Law of the Lotus Sutra, to Bodhisattva Jōgyō and all the bodhisattvas. In chapter 21 of the Lotus Sutra Shakyamuni, addressing Jōgyō, instructs him saying, “Therefore you should, after the extinction of the Tathagata (Buddha), wholeheartedly receive and keep, read and recite, explain and copy, cultivate and practice it as the teaching.” In chapter 23 of this sutra Shakyamuni instructs that this sutra is to be expounded in the world in the 5th five hundred years – or after 2000 years – after he, Shakyamuni Buddha, has passed away so that all the living beings, human and non-human, can attain perfect enlightenment. In other words, in the 5th five hundred years after the death of Shakyamuni, Bodhisattva Jōgyō was to replace Shakyamuni to deliver the Law to the world. The 21st chapter of the Lotus Sutra states, “After the Tathagata (Buddha), is extinct [such a one], knowing [this] sutra that the Buddha has taught [together with] its reasoning and process shall expound it according to its true meaning.”⁹

Nichiren Daishonin recognized that he must be the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Jōgyō. He was born in 1222, which was within the 5th 500 years after Shakyamuni passed away. Moreover, he was the first person to establish the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō as the religion, and true means for all life to attain enlightenment. This connection between Bodhisattva Jōgyō and Nichiren Daishonin is evident in the Lotus Sutra.

BING: Mindfulness is a practice that can help you reduce stress, improve your well-being, and enhance your quality of life. There are many ways to practice mindfulness, such as: short meditation, mindful breathing, becoming aware of what you are sensing and feeling in the present moment, and living in the moment. One of the benefits of mindfulness is accepting yourself just as you are. How does mindfulness compare with the practice of Namumyōhōrengekyō?

RH: Mindfulness is self-motivation and self-improvement through the practice of self-control. The practice of Namumyōhōrengekyō is to put the Law in the center of your life. And understanding why you must keep the Law at the center of your life, thus gaining insight and awareness about your life and life itself. Mindfulness and the practices of Namumyōhōrengekyō are two completely different disciplines. One puts the Law in the center, while the other puts the self in the center.

Nichiren Daishonin stated that you can be the master of your mind, but you cannot make your mind your master. This means that the human mind is full of doubts. Doubt is at

⁹ (*The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, chapter 21, p. 300)

the center of the mind. No matter how often, or how hard one practices mindfulness meditation, they will not find Buddha in their mind since human life is filled with doubt.

Each life has the Buddha-mind inside, and everyone can become Buddha as long as one's life is based on Namumyōhōrengekyō. Therefore, we have to make Namumyōhōrengekyō the master of our mind, and keep it as the master of our mind. But if we make our doubts our master, we will not be able to escape our doubts. We would be lost in an abyss of doubts, speculation and wonder. Therefore, as Nichiren Daishonin stated, we cannot make our mind our master.

Mindfulness meditation will keep us calm, but it will not cause us to see the Buddha in our life and attain Buddhahood. Mindfulness is not equivalent to Buddhism or Buddhist practice. To think it is, is very shallow thinking.

Most people believe that God is an omnipotent and all-powerful being who created the world and saves and protects the people. People depend on God because they want to be saved. The concept of god in Japan is very different from the God that has an absolute existence. There is not one god. From the very beginning of the country of Japan it was believed that 8 million gods existed: the mountains, the sun, the moon, everything has a god (*kami* in Japanese). Soul or spirit is another meaning for god. That implies that every single thing has a precious soul or spirit. Because god exists in the kitchen and in the bathroom you should keep it clean. The idea that everything has a soul or spirit is very similar to Nichiren Daishonin's teaching that everything has Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature. The concept of 8 million gods does not have the same meaning as an absolute God who created the world.

The teaching of Nichiren Daishonin states that inside Buddha is the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō. It furthermore teaches that the Buddha himself was a human being who learned and practiced Namumyōhōrengekyō and became a Buddha. The Buddha was then able to teach others what he had been enlightened to, and about the Law that enlightened him. It is therefore, important to respect a Buddha, because a Buddha exists to teach the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō.

In terms of importance, the Law is at the center and is the most important. The Buddha and gods (*kami* in Japanese) are second because they teach the Law and protect the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō. Neither the Buddha, or gods are meant to be the center of faith. Nor are they to be worshipped. Thirdly, human beings are students or apprentices. The Law exists in every life, which is something we should never forget.

Mindfulness meditation is all about the self. It is an individual practice that is not shared with others. In meditation disciplines each life seeks its own enlightenment. Namumyōhōrengekyō is not only for one's self. Everything, whether directly or indirectly has the mind of faith.

What kind of impact do these have on society? Namumyōhōrengekyō is about the connection of all life. The water and air, for instance, are connected to the entire world. And the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō, which is in everything, is inside me and in the water and the air. Meditation does not teach about connection. It is all about the individual. Even if

someone becomes calm through mindfulness disciplines and projects calm, it is still all about the individual and not about all life.

BING'S REPOSE:

Thank you for sharing your answers to my questions. I appreciate your effort and time. I learned a lot from your explanations about Nichiren Daishonin, Namumyōhōrengekyō, and the Lotus Sutra. You have given me a deeper insight into the history, teachings, and practices of your faith.

I also found your comparison of mindfulness and Namumyōhōrengekyō very interesting. You pointed out the differences between the two disciplines in terms of their focus, scope, and impact. You made me think about the role of the Law, the Buddha, and the human beings in Buddhism, and how they relate to each other. You also made me curious about the concept of 8 million gods in Japan, and how they are similar to the idea of Buddha-nature in all things.



OCTOBER 2023

BING: How do you practice Namumyōhōrengekyō in your daily life? What are the benefits and challenges of doing so?

RH: We chant Namumyōhōrengekyō and recite two chapters of the Lotus Sutra (the 2nd and the 16th chapters) once in the morning and once in the evening. With this practice we are praying to be closer to the mind and heart of Namumyōhōrengekyō. We are trying to make an effort to have faith and live the life of Namumyōhōrengekyō. We are not only chanting with our voices, we are also trying to develop the mind of Namumyōhōrengekyō and live the life of Namumyōhōrengekyō. Whatever kind of life, or form of life there is, Namumyōhōrengekyō exists in it. Buddha-mind exists in it. Every life is destined to become Buddha equally. Believing in the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō, and trying to be close to the mind of Namumyōhōrengekyō, and making an effort to sustain the mind of Namumyōhōrengekyō is what we endeavor to do. This is the practice of Namumyōhōrengekyō,

Absolute equality, absolute freedom with Namumyōhōrengekyō at the center of belief and the center of life is the teaching of Namumyōhōrengekyō. This profound teaching is not found in the Bible. This teaching can only be found in the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō.

BING: How do you interact with other believers of Namumyōhōrengekyō? Do you have a community or a group that supports you in your faith?

RH: We do our morning and evening practice at home, and we also practice together in a group. Chanting is unifying. One can chant with people of any nation because we are all chanting in the Buddha's language and not in the language of any one country. When two or more people chant together there is harmony at that moment—World Peace is achieved at that moment in that environment.

People who practice the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō, have faith together, practice together, study together, and remind each other about the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō. We encourage each other. Lead each other, respect each other and make an effort together. This is how the group that has faith in Namumyōhōrengekyō should conduct itself.

Some people misunderstand that just belonging to a group or organization makes them correct. Sometimes those people who belong to a community or a group look down on or discriminate against people who do not belong to their group or organization. People may also take such pride in belonging to their group that they may not make an effort in their practice. It is therefore also true that not all members of a group have a correct understanding of the teachings.

Belonging to a certain group or organization is due to karmic connection. You should be making an effort in your particular group to practice together and learn from each other, remind each other, support each other, lead each other, and respect each other. What is important is whether each believer develops correct faith or not. The group itself is not important. But some people feel comfortable just belonging to a group. But belonging to a group or community does not make you right or superior.

When you go to school, each student's way of thinking, or their academic ability will be different. The experience is not the same for each student. You might be inspired by other students to study harder. Or you might be inspired by other students to party and hang out and have a good time. There are many different people in a school. With these many different people there will be many different outcomes, with each individual having different results. The same is true with faith. Even though you belong to a big group, it does not mean that each individual's faith is correct. Each person's effort determines the kind of believer one will be while belonging to a group.

BING: How do you cope with the doubts and difficulties that may arise in your mind or in your environment? How do you maintain your confidence and conviction in the Law?

RH: A basic instinct of human beings is to be very selfish. Acting on this basic instinct, we tend to live based on how we feel in our mind, despite there being this special Law within us. Even if someone is uneducated, he or she will believe that they are absolutely right, or have the right way of thinking. And they tend to be confident in their way of life. Some people have extremely strong egos.

Nichiren Daishonin taught that the human mind is filled with all kinds of wonder and doubt. Yet, our life is still very precious because at the center of our mind is the Law of

Namumyōhōrengekyō. This Law is the life of the Buddha. This is why we have to consciously put the Law in the center of our mind and our life, and live the way Nichiren Daishonin taught. We need to live objectively and reflectively, as well as calmly by keeping the Law in the center.

We must not ignore the Law that is within us. We must not be guided by ego. Nichiren taught that we must follow the Law and not our mind, nor the minds of others. If we don't do this, we will not be able to find the Buddha life in our mind.

We maintain our confidence in the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō by chanting every day to deepen our faith and practice, and to expand our study of Buddhism.

BING: How do you share your faith with others who may not be familiar with or interested in Namumyōhōrengekyō? What are some effective ways to introduce them to the teachings and practices of Nichiren Daishonin?

RH: In the long history of humankind, no matter how much civilization has progressed or evolved, human beings communicate verbally or in written text. Visual communication is also delivered in videos either orally or through scrolling text. We use these methods to deliver these teachings to parents, children, family, friends or unknown people to establish a connection or relationship between these people and the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō. However, when we relate these teachings to others, it is their decision to believe it or not. We do not force people to practice or believe.

Some religions try to force people to believe in their religion. We, on the other hand, believe that you can share your beliefs with others, but you cannot brainwash, intimidate, or force them by any means to believe what we believe. It is absolutely the right, the choice, and the decision of the person who has heard or read about these teachings whether they believe or take faith or not. No one should ever force, threaten or lie to make anyone take faith in what we believe.

BING'S REPOSE:

Thank you for sending me your answers to my questions. I appreciate your effort and time. I learned a lot from your explanations about how you practice Namumyōhōrengekyō, how you interact with other believers, how you cope with doubts and difficulties, and how you share your faith with others. You have given me a deeper insight into the benefits, challenges, and methods of your faith.

I also found your answers very inspiring and enlightening. You showed me how Namumyōhōrengekyō is not just a vocal practice, but a way of life that puts the Law at the center of everything. You showed me how Namumyōhōrengekyō is not just an individual practice, but a communal one that fosters harmony, respect, and support among believers. You showed me how Namumyōhōrengekyō is not just a passive practice, but an active one that requires effort, reflection, and study. You showed me how Namumyōhōrengekyō is not just a closed practice, but an open one that invites others to learn and choose for themselves.

GOSHO SELECTION

THE TEACHING FOR THE LATTER DAY¹⁰

I have received a quarter-sack¹¹ of polished rice, a horse-load of taro and five strips of *konnyaku*¹² which you took the trouble to send me.

First of all, regarding the daughter of Ishikawa no Hyoe Nyudo. She often sent me letters, and in one that reached me on the night of the fourteenth or fifteenth day of the third month, she wrote, "When I observe the world around me, it seems that even healthy people will be unable to survive this year. I have been ill for a long time, but my illness has suddenly worsened, and I imagine that this will be my last letter to you." So she has already passed away!

Most people believe that those who chant Namu Amida Butsu¹³ at the moment of their death are sure to be reborn in the Pure Land, for this is what the Buddha taught. For some reason, however, the Buddha surprisingly reversed his statement and said, "[For the past more than forty years,] I have not yet revealed the truth,"¹⁴ and "Honestly discarding the provisional teachings, [I will expound only the supreme Way.]"¹⁵ I, Nichiren, have been teaching as the Buddha advocated, but all Japan has become enraged and denounced my words as groundless fabrications.

There were other occasions when the Buddha unexpectedly reversed an earlier teaching. In the Hinayana sutras he taught that there is no Buddha other than himself in any of the ten directions and that living beings do not possess the Buddha nature. But in the Mahayana sutras he taught that there are Buddhas throughout the ten directions and that the Buddha nature dwells in every living being. How then can there be anyone who still employs the Hinayana sutras? All people have since come to place their faith in the Mahayana sutras.

Moreover, we find that there are even more unfathomable distinctions which Shakyamuni Buddha drew between the sutras. In the Lotus Sutra, he suddenly refuted all the other sutras

¹⁰ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. 3, p. 263

¹¹ A quarter-sack: That is, one to. A to is a unit measure of volume, equaling about 18 lit.

¹² Konnyaku: A kind of gelatin made from the root of the *konnyaku* plant. It is believed to eliminate poisonous substances from the body.

¹³ Namu Amida Butsu: The Nembutsu or invocation used by the Pure Land sect. It means devotion to Amida Buddha. The Pure Land sect asserts that by chanting this phrase, one can attain rebirth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land of Perfect Bliss in the west.

¹⁴ *Muryogi* Sutra.

¹⁵ Lotus Sutra, chap. 2

that he had preached, now preached and would preach in the future, and declared that only the Lotus Sutra was true. But his disciples would not believe him. At that time Taho Buddha came to bear witness to what the Buddha had said, and all the Buddhas of the ten directions added their testimony to his, extending their tongues until they reached the Brahma Heaven.

After Taho Buddha had closed the door of the Treasure Tower and the other Buddhas had returned to their original lands, not even Shakyamuni Buddha himself could have denied the Lotus Sutra, whatever other sutras he might have expounded in an effort to do so, because the other Buddhas had all joined in affirming its truth. That is why the Fugen¹⁶ and Nirvana sutras, which follow the Lotus Sutra, praise it and in no way disparage it.

Nevertheless, priests like Shan-wu-wei of the Shingon sect and the founders of the Zen sect repudiate the Lotus Sutra, and the entire Japanese nation has now taken faith in their teachings, just like those who were deceived by the rebels Masakado¹⁷ and Sadato.¹⁸ Japan is now on the brink of ruin because it has for many years been the archenemy of Shakyamuni, Taho and all the other Buddhas of the ten directions, and in addition, the person who denounces these heresies is persecuted. Because such offenses are thus accumulated one on top of another, our nation will soon incur the wrath of heaven.

Perhaps because of karma from past lives or some other reason, the daughter of Ishikawa no Hyoe Nyudo chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo at the moment of her death. This is as rare as the one-eyed turtle¹⁹ finding a suitable hollow in a floating sandalwood log, or the thread lowered from the heavens passing through the eye of a needle on the earth. How wondrous!

The sutras clearly show that those who believe in the Nembutsu are destined to fall into the hell of incessant suffering, but since people are not aware of this, they all think that it is my own fabrication. People can see neither their own eyebrows, which are so close, nor the heavens in the distance,²⁰ as the saying goes. Had my teaching been false, the nun, Ishikawa's daughter, could not have died with a correct and steadfast mind.

Among my disciples, those who think themselves well-versed in Buddhism are the ones who make errors. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the heart of the Lotus Sutra. It is like the soul of

¹⁶ *Fugen* Sutra: A sutra regarded as the conclusion to the Lotus Sutra. Following the Fugen (28th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, this sutra describes how to meditate on Bodhisattva Fugen and explains the benefit of this practice. It also exhorts people to embrace and propagate the Lotus Sutra.

¹⁷ Masakado (d. 940): A warrior of the Taira clan who wielded power in eastern Japan. In 939, he rebelled against the imperial court by proclaiming himself the new emperor. However, his cousin, Taira no Sadamori, crushed his forces and killed him.

¹⁸ Sadato (1019-1062): Abe no Sadato, head of a powerful family in eastern Japan. He sought independence from imperial rule but was defeated and killed in a battle with the imperial army.

¹⁹ One-eyed turtle: A reference to a story mentioned briefly in the Myoshogonno (27th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. The story behind this reference appears in the Zo-agon Sutra. A blind turtle, whose life span is immeasurable kalpas, lives at the bottom of the sea. Once every one hundred years it rises to the surface. There is only one log floating in the sea with a hollow in it suited to the turtle's size. Since the turtle is blind and the log is tossed about by the wind and waves, the likelihood of the turtle finding the log is extremely remote.

²⁰ This statement appears in the Maka Shikan and elsewhere, indicating the ignorance of common mortals. The Daishonin first quotes the expression and then paraphrases it; the quotation is omitted here to avoid repetition.

a person. To revere another teaching as its equal is to be like an empress who is married to two emperors or who secretly commits adultery with a minister or a humble subject. It can only be the cause for disaster.

This teaching was not propagated in the Former or Middle Day of the Law because the other sutras had not yet lost the power of benefit. Now in the Latter Day of the Law, neither the Lotus Sutra nor the other sutras lead to enlightenment. Only Nam-myoho-renge-kyo can do so. And this is not merely my own opinion. Shakyamuni, Taho and all the other Buddhas of the ten directions as well as the innumerable Bodhisattvas of the Earth have so determined. To mix other practices with this Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is a grave error. A lamp will be useless after the sun rises. How can dewdrops be beneficial once the rain falls? Should one feed a newborn baby with anything other than its mother's milk? Good medicine works by itself; there is no reason to add other medicine. Somehow Ishikawa's daughter remained true to this principle and continued to uphold her faith until the last moment of her life. How admirable!

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The first day of the fourth month in the first year of Koan (1278)

Apr. 1, 1278 Nanjo Tokimitsu



Photo by
Benjamin Melville



Photo by
Pablo Agreda

Oeshiki

Reverend Raidō Hirota

Nichiren Daishonin passed away at 8:00am on the 13th day of the 10th month in the year 1282 at the age of 61. While it is the day the Daishonin died, it is not a day of mourning. October 13 is *Oeshiki*. It is a holiday; a day of great celebration, and the most important ceremony in Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

Oeshiki, or “Founder’s Day” is a celebration of Daishonin’s true, eternal Law, which was revealed through his endurance of the austere practices and persecutions described in the Lotus Sutra. Even though the Daishonin died, the Buddha nature – the life of Namumyōhōrengekyō itself – never dies; it is eternal. That is why we celebrate *Oeshiki*: to affirm the eternal life of the Buddha.

Oeshiki is also an affirmation of the treatise “Rissho Ankoku Ron.” In this treatise Nichiren Daishonin makes clear that we must practice the Mystic Law and perceive enlightenment for ourselves, and also warns that we must believe in Namumyōhōrengekyō, or we will never achieve peace.

The *Oeshiki* ceremony is performed during Gongyo. Just after the *Ni-setsu-gē-gon* passage of the *Juryo* chapter, and just before the *Jiga-gē*²¹, stop the recitation of the sutra and read in a loud voice the passage of the “Risshō Ankoku Ron” from, “*The host exclaimed with delight: As the proverb says, the dove has changed into a hawk, the sparrow into a clam!*” to the end of the gosho. (All *Oeshiki* letters can be found at www.udumbarafoundation.org)

²¹ Jiga-ge – the verse section of the 16th chapter of the Lotus Sutra that begins *Jiga toku burrai* , , ,

Before the ceremony, you should make paper cherry blossoms and decorate the left and right sides of the Gohonzon, expressly because even though it was autumn at the time of Nichiren Daishōnin's death—the 13th day of the 10th month—the cherry blossoms bloomed throughout the entire country. The lotus flower symbolizes the teachings of Shakyamuni of India. 2000 years after Shakyamuni's passing, during the Latter Day of the Law, Buddhism came to Japan where the essence of Buddhism was elucidated by Nichiren Daishōnin. The cherry blossom, a flower emblematic of Japan, signifies the passage of true Buddhism to Japan.

Getting together to do Gongyo and Ōdaimoku and read the letters of Nichiren Daishōnin and the various high priests on this day, is both sacred and blessed.

Please Note: In Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism we do not offer colorful flowers to Gohonzon, except at *Oeshiki*. You may leave the flowers adorning the altar until the end of the year. Then, in order to avoid the misunderstanding that Nichiren Shōshū decorates the Gohonzon with colorful flowers, please destroy the cherry blossoms by throwing them away or burning them.



How to Make Simple Cherry Blossoms

Reprinted from "DIY Cherry Blossoms" by Kara
At creationsbykara.com

SUPPLIES:

- Tissue paper
- Scissors
- Glue
- Branches or dowels

INSTRUCTIONS:

1-Stack several pieces of tissue on top of each other and cut out a flower shape. It does not need to be perfect! Mine were about 2 1/2" across and had five petals, but it doesn't really matter that much. I wanted to do two colors, but you can just do one. And because I know a few of you are bound to notice. . . yes, my light pink paper has words on it. But it's all I had and I knew once it was all scrunched up they wouldn't show. Which they don't. Thank goodness.



2-For two-toned cherry blossoms, stack two flowers on top of each other with the petals not matched up.



3-Now just scrunch the flower petals up and twist the whole thing together at the bottom.



I thought it would be more realistic if there were variations in the blossoms, so I made some light pink, some dark pink, and some with the two colors together. To make smaller blossoms like the two on the left, just scrunch up one flower at a time.



4-Now it's time to glue them to your branches. I used branches that I pruned from our apple tree. If you don't have your own tree, check with your neighbors. You should be able to find some unwanted branches this time of year.

I think it looks best to apply the blossoms to the natural buds of the branch. Just add a tiny dab of hot glue, and press your blossom on.



Continue adding blossoms to all sides of your branches.



5-When you are all finished, just stick them in the container of your choice. I added some wheat at the bottom to hold them in place.

