

THE MIDDLE WAY

ADVOCATING THE TRUE TEACHINGS OF NICHIREN THE TRUE BUDDHA

AUTUMN

2011

HONBUTSU vs. SHAKUBUTSU

Reverend Raidō Hirota

June 2009 / August 2010

QUESTION: You have said that the Honbutsu¹ (true Buddha) idea was first articulated by Nikko Shonin.² Where did he actually say this?

Reverend Hirota (RH): Nikko Shonin wrote in “The 26th Warning Articles” or “26 Admonitions,” “The eternal winds of the *Juryo* chapter³ sweep away all the provisional teachings Shakyamuni⁴ taught since he began teaching at *Budh Gaya*.”⁵ Look in Nikko Shonin’s “Nanjo Dono Gohenji,” “Yuishi Sho (Letter to Yui),” “Yo Saheno Shiro Sho (Letter to Saheno Shiro),” “Goshu Gohenji,” and “Bonno Gohenji.” In all of these writings the word *Hotoke Shonin*, meaning Buddha Daishonin, is used. In “The July 7th Response” the words *Hotoke no Hozen*, meaning reverence to the Buddha, are used. The words *Hossu Shonin no Gohozen*, meaning sacred reverence to the High Priest Daishonin,⁶ appears in “Oseku Gohenji.” *Honbustu* or true Buddha, which is what they called the Nichiren Daishonin after his passing, refers to *hontai* which means true body, and *minamoto* which means source or origin; the example or model of the enlightenment of all living things. This can be compared against the expression *Shakubutsu*⁷ used for Shakyamuni. *Shakubutsu* refers to shadow; tributary or branch; the stage before all people become enlightened.

Let’s make this terminology clear:

Hotoke Shonin - *hotoke* means Buddha. So *Hotoke Shonin* means Nichiren Daishonin.

Hotoke no Hozen – meaning reverence to the Buddha is referring to Nichiren Daishonin.

Hossu Shonin – means the lord or teacher of the whole world.

¹ Honbutsu – true Buddha

² Nikko Shonin – Byakuran Ajari Nikko Shonin (1246-1333) 2nd High Priest of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism who received the transfer of the teachings directly from Nichiren Daishonin.

³ Juyro Chapter – chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra in which Shakyamuni reveals his original enlightenment in the remote past; within this chapter is hidden the Supreme Law which enlightened Shakyamuni and enlightens all Buddhas.

⁴ Shakyamuni – Shakyamuni Buddha – Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (1029 BCE-949 BCE), the historical founder of Buddhism.

⁵ Budh Gaya – Buddhagaya (today Bodhgaya) the place where Shakyamuni was enlightened.

⁶ Daishonin – Nichiren Daishonin – (1222-1282) the true Buddha who realized the Law of Namumyohorengekyo imbedded in the Lotus Sutra and established the Law as the means by which all living beings can become enlightened.

⁷ Shakubutsu – provisional Buddha

The city of *Budh Gaya* is where Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment, and it represents Shakyamuni's lifetime of teachings. Just as what scaffolding is to a building, the lifetime teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, compared to the Lotus Sutra, are provisional, supportive or temporary teachings. Shakyamuni's teachings are the scaffolding, while Namumyōhōrengyō⁸ is the structure itself, or the true teaching. It is said that Namumyōhōrengyō will blow the teachings of *Budh Gaya* out. That means that once Namumyōhōrengyō, the ultimate Law of the universe, is preached, you no longer need the teachings of *Budh Gaya*.

Believer 1 (B1): Where exactly can you find these specific texts you mentioned?

RH: As you can see, these texts were written by Nikko Shonin and not Nichiren Daishonin, so they are hard to find. However, the “26 Admonitions” can be found on pages 16 and 17 of *Gosho Zenshu*.⁹ Nikko Shonin's complete letters have been compiled into several volumes, but they are only available to priests. Even in Japan it is difficult to find these books in the marketplace. The Shoshin-kai newspaper “Keimyo Shimbun” is the publisher of these books. The letters are in chronological order. The “Keimyo Shimbun” publications are the best volumes of Nikko Shonin's letters. Perhaps you can purchase the books from them. But, as you know, the books are only in Japanese.

I hope it is clear that Nikko Shonin did refer to Nichiren Daishonin as a Buddha. But let me further clarify the difference between *Honbutsu* and *Shakubutsu*:

Honbutsu—true Buddha is a Buddha or Buddhas who have the power to deliver the practice of the Law which helps all living things become Buddha.

Shakubutsu—provisional Buddha is a Buddha or Buddhas who neither have the power to deliver the practice of the Law which helps all living things become Buddha, or the practice of Namumyōhōrengyō. This doesn't mean that a *Honbutsu* is a real Buddha and a *Shakubutsu* is not. It means that a *Shakubutsu*, or a provisional Buddha is a Buddha without the power to enlighten people.

The word “Buddha(s) in all three existences of past, present, and future, and in all directions” implies all living things are Buddha, including us, as well as the Buddha described in the scriptures of Buddhism such as Shakyamuni Buddha, Amida Buddha, Dainichi Buddha, Yakushi Buddha, Taho Buddha, and so on. Each Buddha has a world, or “territory” of his/her own for which he or she is responsible. Listed below are some of the examples:

- Shakyamuni Buddha—sage of the Shakya tribe is the Buddha of the saha world (world of endurance (This is the mundane world where we live.)
- Amida Buddha—the Buddha of the Pure Land in the western region of the universe
- Dainichi Buddha—(an imaginary Buddha) the world of Rengezo
- Yakushi Buddha—the Buddha of the Emerald world in the Eastern part of the universe
- Taho Buddha—the Buddha of the Treasure Land also in the Eastern part of the universe.

Within each assigned world, each Buddha has his or her own role. Some have the right and the responsibility to enlighten people and others do not. In “Reply to the Lay Priest Soya” (*Gosho Zenshu*

⁸ Namumyōhōrengyō – the Mystic Law which enlightens all Buddhas; the Supreme Law of life and the universe; the Buddha-nature in all things.

⁹ *Gosho Zenshu* – Japanese gosho compiled by Nichiren Shoshu.

p.1028),¹⁰ Nichiren Daishonin describes the criteria for determining the eligibility to enlighten people with Namumyōhōrengekyō in the age of Mappo.¹¹ According to the Daishonin, a Buddha doesn't have the right to enlighten people if:

- 1) the Buddha doesn't have the power to propagate Namumyōhōrengekyō as a practitioner
- 2) the Buddha hasn't inherited the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō from Shakyamuni Buddha
- 3) the people in the world are not yet ready, or do not have the capacity to listen to and do the practice of Namumyōhōrengekyō.
- 4) the world has not yet reached the age of the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappo*), or the age or era has not yet arrived for the propagation of Namumyōhōrengekyō.

In contrast, a provisional Buddha doesn't have a close, deep relationship with us. Amida Buddha, Dainichi Buddha, Yakushi Buddha, and Taho Buddha are all great Buddhas, but believing in them won't help us become Buddhas, since the territories in which they are charged are different from where we are. No matter how much Japanese citizens believe in the president of the U.S. and contribute to U.S. taxes, the Japanese cannot receive social services from the U.S. while residing in Japan. The president of the U.S. has the responsibility and the power to protect the citizens of the United States as his top priority, but not the citizens of other countries. Similarly, Amida Buddha, Dainichi Buddha, Yakushi Buddha, and Taho Buddha do not have the power or the right to directly enlighten us because they are not the Buddhas of this world, nor are they qualified to teach Namumyōhōrengekyō.

You may say that Shakyamuni Buddha should be able to enlighten us directly since he is a Buddha in charge of this mundane world of endurance. In chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra, "The Emergence of the Treasure Tower", Shakyamuni asked all the human beings in the audience, "Good men! Who will keep this sutra, and read and recite it after my extinction?"¹² In chapter 15 it reads, "Thereupon Bodhisattva-mahasattvas more than eight times the number of the sands of the River Ganges...rose from among the great multitude, joined their hands together towards the Buddha, bowed to him and said: 'World-Honored One! If you permit us to protect, keep, read, recite, and copy this sutra, and make offerings to it strenuously in this Saha-World after your extinction, we will do so, and expound it in this world.'" Shakyamuni responded saying, "No, good men! I do not want you to protect or keep this sutra because there are bodhisattva-mahasattvas sixty thousand times as many as the sands of the River Ganges in this Saha-World....They will protect, keep, read, recite, and expound this sutra after my extinction."¹³ Then at that time the earth shook and cracked open, and up from the earth first sprang Bodhisattva Jogyo,¹⁴ followed by Bodhisattvas, Muhengyo, Jyogyo and Anryugyo,¹⁵ leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. Shakyamuni called the four Bodhisattvas forward and entrusted the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō to Bodhisattva Jogyo to spread in the age of the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappo*). What this implies is that even though Shakyamuni was the Buddha of this mundane world, he couldn't enlighten people in this world in the Latter Day because people could no longer believe in

¹⁰ The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, "On the Five Guides for Propagation," Vol. 2 p. 546

¹¹ Mappo – The Latter Day of the Law ; this present time period which began in 1052; it is also called the evil age.

¹² The Lotus Sutra, translated by Senchu Murano, Chapter 11, p 176

¹³ Ibid, Chapter 15, p. 206

¹⁴ Bodhisattva Jogyo – 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.

¹⁵ Bodhisattvas Muhengyo, Jyogyo and Anryugyo – along with Bodhisattva Jogyo, they are the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. They represent the four virtues of the Buddha's life: eternity (Muhengyo), purity (Jyogyo), happiness (Anryugyo), and true self (Jogyo).

him or his teachings since his teachings had lost the power to enlighten. [Shakyamuni himself said, “In the next five hundred years, quarrels and disputes will arise among the adherents to my teachings, and the pure Law will become obscured and lost.”]¹⁶

You cannot worship Shakyamuni and become enlightened. You cannot believe in Shakyamuni and become enlightened. You must practice what Shakyamuni practiced to become a Buddha. The other four Buddhas mentioned above, and all Buddhas believed in Namumyōhōrengekyō. That is how they became Buddhas. We have to do what all Buddhas in all directions have done, which is practice Namumyōhōrengekyō.

Shakyamuni practiced Namumyōhōrengekyō and became a Buddha. Do the same as he. All other Buddhas did what Shakyamuni did and became Buddhas based on Namumyōhōrengekyō. Shakyamuni himself made a declaration saying that he did not fulfill the aforementioned four criteria for enlightening people. If he had been qualified to enlighten the people of this age, he would not have had to entrust Namumyōhōrengekyō to Bodhisattva Jogyo. Long ago at a time referred to as *sanzen jintengo*¹⁷ Shakyamuni was the 16th son of Datsuchiso Buddha. At that time he formed a relationship with the Lotus Sutra and later became Shakyamuni Buddha in this world and taught the Lotus Sutra. In this world, Shakyamuni himself was a teacher of the Lotus Sutra, but he was not a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra.

In order for Bodhisattva Jogyo to propagate the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō he was reborn as Nichiren Daishonin. Nichiren Daishonin lived in this saha-world—this world of endurance. Living his life as Bodhisattva Jofukyo¹⁸ did, [with compassion for all living things] as a practitioner of Namumyōhōrengekyō, he experienced the Lotus Sutra himself. Of all the teachers, Daishonin was the only practitioner of the Lotus Sutra. He fulfilled the four criteria for enlightening all people. He has deep relationship with all people living in the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappo*). That is why we call him the True Buddha (*Honbutsu*). In contrast, someone with a weak connection or relationship would be called a provisional Buddha (*Shakubutsu*). This doesn’t mean that *Honbutsu* is a real Buddha and *Shakubutsu* is a false Buddha. *Honbutsu* in the Latter Day (*Mappo*) is the Buddha who has a deep relationship with all people and sows the seed of Buddhahood. *Shakubutsu* in the Latter Day is a Buddha who has a weak relationship or connection to the people and cannot sow the seed of Buddhahood. A provisional Buddha (*Shakubutsu*) can only enlighten himself, and is not able to sow the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō and teach people to become enlightened.

B2: People still believe that Shakyamuni is the Buddha who taught the Lotus Sutra. It is his teaching that our practice is based upon. Nichiren Daishonin used Shakyamuni’s teachings to formulate his practice. And the title of Shakyamuni’s Lotus Sutra is the Law that we revere. So it appears that Shakyamuni’s teachings are the foundation of our practice and that Nichiren Daishonin is only the implementer. Based on this, people hold on to the belief that Shakyamuni is the True Buddha (*Honbutsu*). Even though you’ve delineated the criteria for determining a *Honbutsu*, can you further address this issue?

RH: As I mentioned earlier, according to chapter seven of the Lotus Sutra, “The Parable of the Phantom City,” Shakyamuni was the 16th child of Datsuchisho Buddha, the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence. Datsuchisho Buddha, the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence taught all

¹⁶ “On the Five Guides for Propagation,” The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Vol. 2, p. 556

¹⁷ Sanzen-jintengo – an immensely long period of time described in the chapter 7 of the Lotus Sutra, indicating how much time had passed since Shakyamuni was first taught the Lotus Sutra.

¹⁸ Bodhisattva Jofukyo – Bodhisattva Fukyo – a bodhisattva described in the 20th chapter of the Lotus Sutra who revered everyone for their innate Buddha nature, and was persecuted because of his compassionate behavior.

of his sixteen children the Lotus Sutra; this enabled Shakyamuni to teach the Lotus Sutra to people when he was reborn later in this Saha World, or World of Endurance. This means that the Lotus Sutra is not something created by Shakyamuni; Shakyamuni himself was taught the Law by his father, the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence.

At times I have used the example of the law of universal gravitation and Isaac Newton to demonstrate the relation between the Law and the Buddha. The law of universal gravitation had existed before Newton; people were living with the law but just not realizing it was there. Obviously, the law is not something created by Newton. Likewise, the law of Namumyōhōrengekyō had existed before Buddha. Shakyamuni was taught the Law by his father, became Buddha, and taught the Law to people in a later world.

In this later world, just as Christians regard Jesus Christ as their God, people tend to think that Shakyamuni is the one who created the Law and that he is the True Buddha (*Honbutsu*). It was explained in the Lotus Sutra that the charismatic power of Shakyamuni will last only for two thousand years and after that, the age will come when people cannot believe in Shakyamuni or his teachings; and, only by delivering the essence of Namumyōhōrengekyō can people become enlightened. In the world where people who had a relationship with Shakyamuni and his teachings have disappeared, and his teachings have lost their power, where believing in Shakyamuni will no longer lead to enlightenment, and Shakyamuni doesn't have the power or the right to reveal his teachings to people, Bodhisattva Jofukyo was appointed as a practitioner to propagate the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō in the age of the Latter Day of the Law as and thereby sowing the seed of Buddhahood in the people of this age. Shakyamuni did teach Lotus Sutra but he was not a practitioner at the time, and that is why he can't show us directly how to become Buddha.

It was only Nichiren Daishonin in the age of Mappo who knew the essence and all the essential aspects of the Lotus Sutra and thus was able to claim that Shakyamuni is not the one who created the Law. He strove hard, as the reincarnation of Bodhsattva Jogyo, to deliver the Law. In Nichiren Shoshu, we call Nichiren the True Buddha because he is the one who directly taught the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō, the Law of the Lotus Sutra. Just as Nichiren did, reciting Namumyōhōrengekyō and living as a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra is the practice for becoming Buddha; making Nichiren or Shakyamuni the object of worship and praying is not the way to become Buddha.

Nichiren was a human being just like us; he showed us that each of us has the potential to become Buddha if we practice the Law of the Lotus Sutra, and this is why he was able to teach the teachings directly to people. Turning Buddha into an object of worship and praying without doing anything else to improve the situation won't help you. No parents can continue to fund their children throughout their whole lives; no doctors can help a patient who doesn't try to fight his illness. Believing in Buddha is not the essence of our practice; we have to believe in the Law.

B2: Is the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni's teaching; his Lotus Sutra?

RH: It's not HIS teachings; it is the Law he came to realize in the process of practicing as a human being to become a Buddha.

B2: Towards the end of the *Shoho Jisso Sho* Nichiren Daishonin said, "It is also because of karma that some Buddhas are born as provisional ones." Can you give further explanation of this?

RH: Karma is formed by:

A. fixed destiny

- B. destiny decided by the coincidence of chances
- C. fate resulting from the wrong doing from the past

The Lotus Sutra teaches that all living things in the universe have an equal chance of becoming a Buddha if they follow and practice the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō. Everyone has the fixed destiny to become a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra, but most of us don't realize that destiny (A).

Only trees (since the "Gohonzon" is inscribed on paper or on a wooden plank) which have met with a chance (B) to become an object of worship are used to represent Buddhas. Some trees, or some parts of the same tree, which have met with a chance to become an object of worship representing provisional Buddhas cannot directly teach people, because of the fate resulting from wrong doing in the past (C).

B2: Please explain the purpose or function of a provisional Buddha (*Shakubutsu*)?

RH: Let's imagine that the Lotus Sutra is a dramatic script. The True Buddha (*Honbutsu*) would be the main character, who is in the center of the scenario within the context of the theme which the drama as a whole has to reveal to the audience; while the provisional Buddha (*Shakubutsu*) is the supporting character who keeps the story going.

B2: Are the other Buddhas you mentioned provisional Buddhas in their worlds or territories, or are they true Buddhas in their territories? Could they really enlighten anyone in their own territories?

RH: They are *Shakubutsu* (provisional Buddhas) even in their own territories. If they do not have the power or the right to reveal the fundamental Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō and persuade people with the fundamental Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō and thereby help people in their territories become Buddha, they are *Shakubutsu*.

B2: Why do we need a true Buddha (*Honbutsu*)?

RH: If it were not for Namumyōhōrengekyō, which is delivered or revealed by the true Buddha, not one of us could become a Buddha. The law of universal gravitation has always existed in the world but we would not have had a chance to realize it if Newton hadn't discovered it and released his findings. Similarly, the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō has always existed, but we wouldn't know the essence of it without the true Buddha. The true Buddha is important in that he teaches us not to think that provisional Buddhas are the only Buddhas; we have to realize that all living things possess the essence of Buddhahood, and that we just have to realize it to become Buddha.

B2: Is a true Buddha a *Honbutsu* for all worlds or just for one world?

RH: For all worlds; *Honbutsu* is the Buddha for all things in the universe.

B2: What is the difference between a true Buddha (*Honbutsu*) and an eternal Buddha?

RH: *Honbutsu* and an eternal Buddha are the same.

B2: Nichiren Daishonin was the true Buddha for this world in the age of Mappo. Was he more than that?

RH: We usually think that there are causes which bring about effects; so we tend to try to think that the essence of the Law in the age of Nichiren Daishonin is the effect of what Shakyamuni had taught. However, as I described in the answer to your first question, the charismatic power of Shakyamuni is not capable of bringing us to the state of Buddhahood. This means that we have to investigate the result to realize what the reason for it is. In this case, we have to study Namumyōhōrengekyō to come to understand what Shakyamuni and his teachings were.

To explain this further, let's take an apple, for example. Most people in this world think the flesh of an apple is the apple, and the rest is scrap. But, from an apple's stand point, the seed (the cause) is the source of its life to continue on, and the flesh is the nutrition for the seed to sprout. Imagine that the flesh of the apple is *Hongamyo*; and imagine that the seed, the final result, is *Honninmyo*. Once you eat the apple, *Hongamyo* is over. It only brings satisfaction for you, alone. However, *Honninmyo*—the seed creates hundreds of fruits, and sends off life to the next generation. This life is forever. It connects to many lives, and expands into all life.

The *Hongamyo* Buddha is a *Shakubutsu* (provisional Buddha), the real Buddha in silhouette (a supporting actor). The *Honninmyo* Buddha is the *Honbutsu* (true Buddha), the real Buddha (main actor). That's the difference between the teachings of Shakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin.

Honninmyo (True Cause) looks closely into the essence of the Law, while *Hongamyo* (True Effect) only looks at the state of being Buddha and celebrates Shakyamuni as the symbol of Buddhahood. For us people to become Buddha, understanding the process of achieving Buddhahood is important; only worshipping the Buddha will not help us.

B2: Isn't the Law of Namumyōhōrengekyō the true, eternal Buddha? After all, it is the Buddha-nature.

RH: Please refer to the answer to your first question; Namumyōhōrengekyō is not the Buddha himself.

*Believe in the Gohonzon with all your heart, for it is the robe to
protect you in the next life.*

Nichiren Daishonin
“Letter to Jakunichi-bo”

ON AGING AND DYING
Reverend Raidō Hirota
June 2009 / August 2011

QUESTION: What does Buddhism say about aging? Does it teach ways to accept how we lose vitality or offer insight as to how one may hold onto it longer?

RH: Life is the four sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death. You cannot stop or turn back time. Many religions, including the Soka Gakkai say we can escape from the four sufferings. According to these religions, if you cannot escape the four sufferings, your faith is not strong enough due to doubt. It is a universal truth that all life exists with the four sufferings. You must accept this and don't get upset by it, don't run away from it or deny it. No matter how much your health declines, you must live with a sense of the life of Namumyōhōrengekyō. It is very important that you make your way of life face to face with Gohonzon and telling others about it. The physical body will decline, but the life of *myoho* will never decline. Even though you may lose you memory, there's no barrier to the Buddha's life. The Buddha's life is never-ending even though the body dies.

B1: How do you explain this concept to someone who has no knowledge of Buddhism, but is trying to find peace in his life? Everyone is concerned with their own mortality, even if they are somewhat young. The only understanding most people have about Buddhism is feel good statements like "compassion", "enlightenment", etc.

RH: Life always consists of the four sufferings: birth, aging, sickness and death. Human beings' biggest weakness is the fear of dying. Many religions try to take advantage of this weakness. For instance, some say if you believe in this god, you will not die, or sickness will be healed. Or some say you can be revived after death. Some even keep the dead body in their houses. There are cults led by gurus which believe such things.

I know that many of you were introduced to Buddhism through the Soka Gakkai, which taught that if you practiced their teachings you could overcome the four sufferings. But their teachings are different from the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. True Buddhism teaches that you should keep your faith and control your mind when confronted with the four sufferings.

B3: I have a tough time understanding life and death. My parents are getting older. They are both about to be 78 years old. They are healthy but they are talking about death a lot. I am not sure what to say. It makes me very uncomfortable. I realize how much I depend on them and how helpless I am in the face of losing them. Most of all I am afraid. Afraid for them and afraid of how I will make it in the world without them. Life is so precious!! I also think about my children and my wife.

RH: Nichiren Daishonin says in "The Importance of the Moment of Death"¹⁹ (Gosho Zenshu p. 1404). It means: "First, learn and brace yourself for the fact that a human being will die someday without fail. Then, learn other facets of life."

Most people in this world, from the time of their childhood, dislike death, shun death, fear death, and are unwilling to accept or acknowledge death. And, they assume that it's all over when you die.

Learning and bracing yourself for death is not something grim or ominous. Conversely, it's a way for us to take notice of how precious this life that we have received, is. This is something we should learn from a young age. Don't lie, don't steal, you can't bully people, you have to study... these shouldn't be the only points to make. What we need to teach is this: Because our lifetime is short, we

¹⁹ The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, Vol. 2 p. 759

have to live right. “As long as I’m having a good time and doing fine right now, I’m cool” – living in this way isn’t the way to live.

Life is as important and precious as a treasure, because there is a limit to life. If there were no limitations, nobody would think a great deal of it. If you knew that you wouldn’t die, even if you were being reckless, nobody would pay attention to safety or health. Nobody would put any effort into living. Because you’ll die someday, the time you are alive becomes important. Because there is a goodbye, meeting another being is important. And death is not the end of a life. It’s a passage through to eternal life.

Nichiren Daishonin says (in the same goshō mentioned above): “The exhaled breath never waits for the inhaled one.... Whether one is wise or foolish, old or young, one never knows what will happen to one from one moment to the next”.

Exhaled air leaves your body without your effort, just as air expels from a balloon. [The exhaled air] is a breath of death. The inhaled air needs strength for the body to live, so it’s a breath of life.

The last breath a human being takes ends with an exhaled air. A person dies because he didn’t have the strength to take a breath. In other words, living things live by connecting the breath of life and the breath of death from moment to moment.

But, there is no guarantee that the breath of life will always come after the breath of death. The Buddha’s teaching tells us that we should be conscious of the fact that all of us are always living back to back with life and death.

If a person thinks that life is all about the time one is alive, then for that person death would fundamentally be suffering. [That way of thinking] would bring forth the feeling that there is no place to go. It would generate distress and suffering.

A person who once was alive stops responding to anything. It’s reality that seems like a lie and a dream. What was existence and relationships about, then? It’s a truth that just can’t be reasoned.

Not just death, but to be born, to grow old, to get sick, and to die are life itself. Buddhism teaches us that life is eternal; it has no beginning or end. It is not because I’m a Buddhist believer [that I say that], but I truly, genuinely believe that.

We think our lives are our own, but life is not something you possess. There are people who think it’s their right to live or to kill, but that’s wrong. You are taking this life under your care. It’s a life that you are borrowing. Because it’s a life that you are taking care of, or borrowing, there comes a time when you will have to return it.

If you are saddened by death, then you have to value the time while you are alive. While you are alive, you have to find out why you were born, why you are alive. Nichiren Daishonin says that there is nothing more regrettable than not realizing that your human life hosts the same life of Namumyōhōrengekyō as does the most precious life, that of Buddha.

The teaching says that at the root of every moment in life and death, there is the life of Namumyōhōrengekyō. All sentient beings in this world are connected. There is no life that is not connected to one another.

The Life of human beings, stones (minerals), plants, animals, insects, earth, water, fire, air, light... so many lives are connected. Your life is supported by those connections. The entirety becomes One Life. We think that billions of living organisms exist on this earth [independently], but Buddha’s view is that this One Life consists of all life connections, including every life form that exists beyond the earth.

Death is a transformation within the One Life. So, the one life that contains so many connected lives isn’t the one that died. The One Life continues to live and to exist eternally. Even when the end of the earth comes, the existence of the connected life (as the One Life, the totality) remains the same.

For example, the cherry blossoms of last year’s cherry tree fell to the ground. Would you say

that the cherry tree died? Just as it did last year, the cherry tree blossomed again this year. They might look the same, but there is not even one flower that is the same as the others. The transformation occurs based on the cherry tree, the life totality.

Farewell is a lament and sorrow, as if the world ended. However, the One Life (the connected life) does not end. It's not the end of the world. It is eternal. That's what Nichiren Daishonin taught. So, brace yourself on that point and practice it on a routine basis.

See your life objectively, and ask yourself: Am I leading my life in a way in which I will have no regrets should I die now?

We are admonished to always see our own life objectively. Learn from Nichiren Daishonin's teaching regarding what life is about, and overcome your angst and sorrows.

CONGRATULATIONS

Oeshiki

October 13, 1282

At 8:00 am on the 13th day of the 10th month in the year 1282 Nichiren Daishonin, at the age of 61, passed away. While October 13th 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. It is 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. 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"²⁰. 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.

²⁰ Rissho Ankoku Ron – "On Securing the Peace of the Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism."

You should make paper cherry blossoms and decorate the left and right sides of the Gohonzon, specifically because even though Nichiren Daishōnin died in autumn—the 13th day of the 10th month—the cherry blossoms bloomed throughout the country. The lotus flower symbolizes the teachings of Shakyamuni of India; after 2000 years during the Latter Day of the Law Buddhism came to Japan where the essence of Buddhism was elucidated by Nichiren Daishōnin. The cherry blossom symbolizes the passage of true Buddhism to Japan.

To get together to do gongyo and daimoku, and read the letters the Nichiren Daishonin and the various high priests on this day, is both sacred and blessed.

GOSHO SELECTION

“The Heritage of the Ultimate Law”

I HAVE JUST carefully read your letter. To reply, the ultimate law of life and death as transmitted from the Buddha to all living beings is Myōhōrengekyō. The five characters of Myōhōrenge-kyō were transferred from the two Buddhas inside the Treasure Tower, Shakyamuni and Taho, to Bodhisattva Jogyo, carrying on a heritage unbroken since the infinite past. *Myō* represents death and *ho* represents life. Life and death are the two phases passed through by the entities of the Ten Worlds, the entities of all sentient beings which embody the law of cause and effect (*rengē*).

T'ien-t'ai said, "You must realize that the interrelated actions and reactions of sentient beings and their environments all manifest the law of simultaneity of cause and effect." Sentient beings and their environments" here means the reality of life and death. The law of simultaneity of cause and effect is clearly at work in everything that lives and dies.

The Great Teacher Dengyo said, "Birth and death are the mysterious workings of the life essence. The ultimate reality of life lies in existence and nonexistence." No phenomena -- heaven or earth, Yin or Yang, the sun and moon, the five planets, or any life-condition from Hell to Buddhahood -- are free from birth and death. Thus the life and death of all phenomena are simply the two phases of Myōhōrengekyō. In his *Maka Shikan*, T'ien-t'ai says, "The emergence of all things is the manifestation of their intrinsic nature, and their extinction, the withdrawal of that nature into the state of latency." Shakyamuni and Taho Buddhas, too, are the two phases of life and death.

Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment countless aeons ago, the Lotus Sutra which leads all people to Buddhahood, and we ordinary human beings are in no way different or separate from each other. Therefore, to chant Myōhōrengekyō with this realization is to inherit the ultimate law of life and death. To carry on this heritage is the most important task for Nichiren's disciples, and that is precisely what it means to embrace the Lotus Sutra. For one who summons up his faith and chants Namumyōhōrengekyō with the profound insight that now is the last moment of his life, the sutra proclaims: "After his death, a thousand Buddhas will extend their hands to free him from all fear and keep him from falling into evil paths." How can we possibly hold back our tears at the inexpressible joy of knowing that not just one or two, nor only one hundred or two hundred, but as many as a thousand Buddhas will come to greet us with open arms!

One who does not have faith in the Lotus Sutra will instead find his hands firmly gripped by the guards of hell, just as the sutra warns, "...After he dies, he will fall into the hell of incessant suffering." How pitiful! The ten kings of hell¹¹ will then pass judgment on him, and the heavenly messengers¹¹ who have been with him since his birth will berate him for his evil deeds.

Just imagine that those thousand Buddhas extending their hands to all Nichiren's disciples who chant Namumyōhōrengekyō are like so many melons or moonflowers extending their slender vines. My disciples have been able to receive and embrace the Lotus Sutra by virtue of the strong ties they formed with this teaching in their past existences. They are certain to attain Buddhahood in the future. The heritage of the Lotus Sutra flows within the lives of those who never forsake it in any lifetime whatsoever -- whether in the past, the present or the future. But those who disbelieve and slander the Lotus Sutra will "destroy the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world. Because they cut themselves off from the potential to attain enlightenment, they do not share the ultimate heritage of faith.

All disciples and believers of Nichiren should chant Namumyōhōrengekyō with one mind (itai doshin), transcending all differences among themselves to become as inseparable as fish and the water in which they swim. This spiritual bond is the basis for the universal transmission of the ultimate law of life and death. Herein lies the true goal of Nichiren's propagation. When you are so united, even the great hope for kosen-rufu can be fulfilled without fail. But if any of Nichiren's disciples should disrupt the unity of itai doshin, he will destroy his own castle from within.

Nichiren has been trying to awaken all the people of Japan to faith in the Lotus Sutra so that they too can share the heritage and attain Buddhahood. But instead they attacked me time and again, and finally had me banished to this island. You have followed Nichiren, however, and met with sufferings as a result. It pains me deeply to think of your anguish. Gold can neither be burned by fire nor corroded or swept away by water, but iron is vulnerable to both. A wise person is like gold and a fool like iron. You are like pure gold because you embrace the "gold" of the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra reads in part, "Sumeru is the loftiest of all mountains. The Lotus Sutra is likewise the loftiest of all the sutras." It also states, "The good fortune of the believer cannot be burned by fire or washed away by water."¹⁵

It must be ties of karma from the distant past that have destined you to become my disciple at a time like this. Shakyamuni and Taho Buddhas certainly realize this truth. The sutra's statement, "In lifetime after lifetime they were always born together with their masters in the Buddha's lands throughout the universe,"¹⁶ cannot be false in any way.

How admirable that you have asked about the transmission of the ultimate law of life and death! No one has ever asked me such a question before. I have answered in complete detail in this letter, so I want you to take it deeply to heart. The important point is to carry out your practice confident that Namumyōhōrengekyō is the very lifeblood which was transferred from Shakyamuni and Taho to Bodhisattva Jogyo.

The function of fire is to burn and give light. The function of water is to wash away filth. The winds blow away dust and breathe life into plants, animals and human beings. The earth nourishes the grasses and trees, and heaven provides nourishing moisture. Myōhōrengekyō too works in all these ways. It is the cluster of blessings brought by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. The Lotus Sutra says that Bodhisattva Jogyo should now appear to propagate this teaching in the Latter Day of the Law, but has this actually happened? Whether or not Bodhisattva Jogyo has already appeared in this world, Nichiren has at least made a start in propagating this teaching.

Be resolved to summon forth the great power of your faith, and chant Namumyōhōrengekyō with the prayer that your faith will be steadfast and correct at the moment of your death. Never seek any other way to inherit the ultimate law and manifest it in your life. Only then will you realize that earthly desires are enlightenment and the sufferings of life and death are nirvana. Without the lifeblood of faith, it would be useless to embrace the Lotus Sutra.

I am always ready to clear up any further questions you may have.

With my deep respect,

Nichiren, the Shramana of Japan

The eleventh day of the second month in the ninth year of Bun'ei
(1272)

Feb 11, 1272 to Sairen-bo Nichijo