

THE MIDDLE WAY

ADVOCATING THE TRUE TEACHINGS OF NICHIREN THE TRUE BUDDHA

WINTER

2009



Oeshiki altar

In this Issue

Elements of the Altar	1
Questions from a Believer	3
Discussions on the Lotus Sutra	5
The Third Treasure/The Three	
Virtues	8
Buddhist Holidays	11
Recitation of the Hoben and	
Juryo Chapters	13

The Middle Way is published by
Udumbara Foundation

Website: www.udumbarafoundation.org

E-mail: ufound@yahoo.com



Advisor: Reverend Raido Hirota
Founder and Editor-in-Chief: Peach Pair

In this issue: Translators: Larry Alston,
Kay Dubitsky, Hiro Uryu
All positions are voluntary

ELEMENTS OF THE ALTAR

Reverend Raido Hirota

Mt. Holly, New Jersey

June 2007

QUESTION: Please explain the elements of the altar and how to set up the altar. Should I set up an altar even though I don't have Gohonzon¹?

Reverend Hirota (RH): Initially, believers built private sanctuaries or shrines just for Gohonzon. But not all believers could afford such a building, so they made a separate room for Gohonzon. Again, not all believers could afford that either. So they created a space for Gohonzon and made a *butsudan*. The *butsudan* itself is a special place apart from your living space where you conduct your daily Buddhist practice.

Dan (of *butsudan*) is a derivative of *shumidan*, which means dais for a Buddhist image. Imagine this dais rising up from the center of the universe, and then Gohonzon is placed in it. This dais or *shumidan* that rises is the symbol of enlightenment. The object of worship (*honzon*) is the Buddha (*butsu*). Combining the word *dan* from *shumidan* and the word *butsu* meaning Buddha, we have the word *butsudan* (the Buddha's dais). Shakyamuni² preached the Lotus Sutra on Eagle Peak.³ The symbol of enlightenment is Eagle Peak.

¹ Gohonzon – the scroll that is the mandala or object of worship of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism and represents the Law of Namu-myoho-enge-kyo.

² Shakyamuni – Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (1029 B.C.E.-949 B.C.E.), the historical founder of Buddhism

³ Eagle Peak - (*Ryoju-sen*) – A mountain in ancient India where Shakyamuni preached the Lotus Sutra. It also symbolizes the Buddha Land or the enlightened land.

When we face the *butsudan* and do Gongyo⁴ and daimoku, it is the same as listening to the preaching of the Lotus Sutra on Eagle Peak.

Beliver 1 (B1): What is the meaning of the candles, the greens, the incense, the bell and the water?

RH: The base of the **crane** figurine that is often placed next to Gohonzon is in the shape of a saké container. Saké is made of rice. It is fermented for six months, then poured into another vessel and fermented for another six months. If a believer wanted to offer saké to Nichiren Daishonin, he would use the best quality rice. A believer who offered saké to Daishonin went through so much trouble to make the saké, the gift was truly a gift of the heart. The crane is a symbol for the Daishonin. Believers put the saké in a ginger jar-shaped container and used the crane as the lid to present it to Daishonin. They placed the container next to the Gohonzon. This gift was an expression of sincere faith. To go through the trouble of brewing saké for a year and make an elegant and symbolic presentation of it demonstrates sincerity.

If you buy saké for yourself because you want to drink it, don't offer it to Gohonzon. But if you buy saké specifically as an offering for Gohonzon, you can later drink it.

Shikimi, the evergreens which we place on the altar, represent eternal life. *Shikimi*, is an aromatic evergreen native to Japan. The leaves are also dried and made into incense for the altar. Don't let the green leaves wither and die. Keep fresh greens on the altar, and change the water in the vase every morning.

The **candles** represent life and death. As the candles burn down, this represents the waning of life. Just as green leaves represent eternal life, the candles represent the cycle of life and death. The character for *shi* (as in *shikimi*) means death in Japanese. As we said, the *shikimi* leaves are dried, ground up and made into incense. When the **incense** is burned it symbolizes life and death (the symbolism of life and death is complete). Leaves are representative of life, but when they are burned as incense that represents death, thus the duality.

As the candles burn down it indicates life diminishing until it burns out, which represents death.

The candle represents death (*ku*)⁵. The incense represents life (*ke*)⁶. When the candle is used to light the incense this represents the middle way (*chu*)⁷ between life and death. The incense is made from the evergreens which are the symbol for life, but as I said, once we burn the incense, it becomes a symbol for death. As the incense burns, though its physical condition disintegrates, it emits a fragrant smell into the air. This represents *chu*, the spirit of the Buddha.

Our life right now is a temporary existence. Before we were born—before we came into this physical existence—there was life. After we die and lose this physical state, there will still be life. Life continues.

B1: What do we do with the ashes in the incense burner when they start to overflow? Do we keep them?

RH: You can throw them away, or use them as fertilizer. Do anything you want with them.

⁴ Gongyo – morning and evening recitation of the 2nd and 16th chapters of the Lotus Sutra.

⁵ Ku –the truth of non-substantiality.

⁶ Ke – the truth of temporary existence.

⁷ Chu – the truth of the Middle Way.

Water is placed on the highest level of the altar below the Gohonzon. The reason for this is because all life starts from water. Don't offer juice or tea. Offer only water.

First thing in the morning, before you do anything, fill the water cup and place it in front of Gohonzon. Before evening Gongyo pour the water out either into a kettle or pitcher, or a plant. Then return the cup to its place on the altar.

If you offer rice to Gohonzon, the offering should be the first serving out of the pot. You present it to Gohonzon, then after morning Gongyo you eat it or return it to the pot. Don't leave the rice on the altar. Rinse out the rice vessel and store it. If you don't eat rice for breakfast, offer toast, but don't put butter on the toast. Or offer whatever grain you eat. Offer fruit. Keep fresh fruit on the altar for only a day or two. Do not offer fruit that has fruit flies circling around it. You can also offer any vegetable except onions and garlic. You can also offer nuts. But not meat.

QUESTIONS FROM A BELIEVER

Reverend Raido Hirota

Mt. Holly, New Jersey

June 2007

QUESTION: Don't all your wishes come true if you chant Namu-myoho-renge-kyo?

RH: It is relayed in the parable in the Juryo (16th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra that the excellent physician's children got violently ill after taking poison. The father made good medicine, but the children refused to take the medicine. The children were supposed to die but eventually they were restored to good health after they took the medicine.

In interpreting this parable, SGI⁸ tells its followers their lives will be extended if they chant. In this parable the children who took the poison and were at the point of death when they finally took the good medicine of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo⁹ had their lives extended. What this means is that they woke up to the greatness of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo. The Gakkai believes that Namu-myoho-renge-kyo is for acquiring material benefit. That is not what it is being conveyed in the Lotus Sutra in general in this parable in particular. And that is not what Nichiren Daishonin¹⁰ taught. To the contrary, Nichiren Daishonin taught that Namu-myoho-renge-kyo is not for material gain. To realize that you have the life of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo within you is the true purpose of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo.

B2: Do you curb your aspirations?

RH: *Kyo shi jumyo* means to realize that you have the life of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo. It doesn't matter how long you want to live, there are limits to how long you will live. How you live is the

⁸ SGI – Soka Gakkai International- (Gakkai) – a secular organization that misuses some of the doctrine of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism in its own philosophy and practice.

⁹ Namu-myoho-renge-kyo – the Mystic Law; the ultimate Law of life and the universe; the Buddha nature in all things.

¹⁰ Nichiren Daishonin – (1222-1282) – the true Buddha. He realized the Law of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo imbedded in the Lotus Sutra, and established the Law as the means by which all living beings can realize enlightenment.

essential point. Do you live putting your desires in the center? Or do you live with the realization that you have the life of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo within you? Do you live as though you had not yet taken the medicine of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo? Or do you live knowing you have taken the medicine of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo? You have the same life whether you have taken Namu-myoho-renge-kyo or not. The difference lies in the way you live. Even if you take the medicine of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo, sometimes you get lazy, sometimes you don't want to chant, sometimes you forget. Despite how you feel, chant morning and evening Gongyo and try to remember you have the life of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo inside you.

QUESTION: Please share with me why it is good to pray for someone who has not been nice to you.

RH: Even if you dislike a person, that person still has the life of Buddha. Therefore, you pray for that person and shakubuku¹¹ that person to bring him or her to an understanding and the way of life that befits the life of the Buddha. You should not avoid the person. Confront the problem; talk to him or her and learn from this ordeal. Stand strong.

B2: When you face Gohonzon and chant Namu-myoho-renge-kyo, are you thinking about that person and your problem with him and wanting to recognize their Buddha nature? What process takes place? Do you put their face next to Gohonzon as you think about them? Do you stop disliking them and start to recognize the Buddha in them? What process takes place in order to overcome this problem?

RH: It's not the person so much that's important, as it is the situation. You think about how you can better deal with the situation so that it doesn't happen with anyone else. It is not possible that you are 100% right and the other person is 100% wrong; or that you are 100% the cause of the situation, or that the other person 100% the cause of the problem. For that reason the focus must not be on the person, but on the situation.

QUESTION: Please explain Kosen-rufu.¹²

RH: In the goshō, "The Essence of the Yakuo Chapter," Daishonin wrote, "After I have passed into extinction, in the last five-hundred-year period you must spread it [the Lotus Sutra] abroad widely throughout Jambudvīpa and never allow it to be cut off." This means within the first 500 years following the 2000 years after the death of Shakyamuni.

The Gakkai thinks that having many people receive *gojukai*¹³ and Gohonzon is *kosen-rufu*. They teach that if you have Gohonzon good things will happen to you, and if you reject or are opposed to their practice you will be punished. That is how they shakubuku. It's completely different from Daishonin's teaching. You can't call what they do *kosen-rufu*.

B3: This is what *kosen-rufu* is not. What is *kosen-rufu*?

¹¹ Shakubuku – propagating true Buddhism by refuting erroneous teachings.

¹² Kosen-rufu – widely spreading true Buddhism.

¹³ Gojukai – the consecration and conversion ceremony for accepting faith in Nichiren Daishonin's true Buddhism.

RH: It's impossible for all people in the world to receive Gohonzon and practice. One does not start the practice of true Buddhism by being coerced. One has to believe in it with one's own heart, and want to practice of one's own accord. Otherwise nothing comes from the practice.

Daishonin said you should spread the seeds of Buddhism by talking to people just as Bodhisattva Jofukyo¹⁴ did. That action is *kosen-rufu*. Getting people to receive Gohonzon is not *kosen-rufu*. *Kosen-rufu* does not come about by force, intimidation, or exerting power over others. It is more difficult to establish a connection to someone and to explain to them in a compassionate way what this Buddhism is about than it is to carry out shakubuku in the way the Gakkai does. It is difficult to talk to someone with compassion when they confront you with anger and animosity and verbal abuse. When you are confronted with such opposition, it is very difficult to maintain your composure and resolve. But this is how Daishonin instructs us to behave.

The Gakkai believes that if a person refuses to join their organization, he does not have Buddha nature. This is fundamentally different from Nichiren Daishonin's teaching. Daishonin teaches that everyone has Buddha nature. That is why you continue to talk to someone even though it arouses anger. Talking to them indicates that you recognize their Buddha nature.

The Gakkai says Daishonin only shakubukued about 100 people, while they have shakubukued tens of thousands of people all over the world.

As I mentioned at another time, a Soka Gakkai member told me that Soka Gakkai members can do anything they want to achieve *kosen-rufu*, and it will be forgiven. They think they are achieving *kosen-rufu* because they are recruiting a lot of new members. But that is the complete opposite of what Nichiren Daishonin's true Buddhism is all about. They have a large membership, but the wrong teaching.

DISCUSSION ON THE LOTUS SUTRA

Reverend Raido Hirota

Mt. Holly, New Jersey

June 2007

QUESTION: What does the Lotus Sutra mean?

RH: *Myoho-renge-kyo* is a condensed version of the Lotus Sutra.

Myo is the mystery and wonder of the life of all people. What is wonderful is that selfish, egotistical people, such as ourselves, are common mortals who also have Buddha nature and can realize enlightenment.

To teach the mystery of life is *Ho*, which is the Law. *Ge* is derived from *renge*. *Renge* means cause and effect, and also indicates eternal life. *Ge* means *myoho*. [The effect (*ge*) is the mystic Law (*myoho*).] For example, *renge* is the lotus flower. The Lotus Sutra teaches about the mystery of the lotus flower. The lotus flower is symbolic of cause of effect. The sutra teaches you about *ge*. *Myoho-renge-kyo* is the Lotus Sutra. Only the Lotus Sutra teaches about eternal life.

¹⁴ Bodhisattva Jofukyo – (Fukyo) – a bodhisattva described in chapter 20 of the Lotus Sutra who revered all people for their inherent Buddha nature.

In Japan “whah whah” is the sound of a dog barking. Here in America it is “woof woof.” In Japan there is a particular bird called a Japanese Bush-warbler whose whistle sounds like “*Hokekyo*.”¹⁵ You can hear it on You Tube. (Google “Japanese Bush-warbler” to access it.) So even in Japan birds sing “*Hokekyo*.” That is, at least to the Japanese ear it sounds like “*Hokekyo*.” Listen to it and determine what it sounds like to you.

B4: Please explain the character “myo.” I’ve seen in the goshō where “*myo*” is described as three qualities – to open, to revive and to be endowed and perfect.

RH: *Kai ji go nyo*. Kai means to open—to open the gates of sufferings and desires, and reveal the Buddha nature inside.

Perfect means that all teachings taught before the Lotus Sutra are embodied in the Lotus Sutra.

The sutras which preceded the Lotus Sutra taught that common mortals, women, evil people, people of Learning and Realization¹⁶ could never become enlightened. But when it comes to the Lotus Sutra everyone can become enlightened. This is the meaning of revive—to return to life.

These are the meanings of open, perfectly endowed and revive. With the one word *myo* all living things become Buddha. The teaching in the sutra that states that anyone can become Buddha is in one word “*myo*.” *Myo* can thus be divided into three parts: open, revive and perfectly endowed.

QUESTION: How should we interpret the Lotus Sutra in Mappo¹⁷? The 28 chapters as told by Shakyamuni are invalid and have no power to redeem. It only retains its formality. Does it still serve a purpose for us to study the Lotus Sutra, or should we just totally disregard it? Am I right in my understanding that the Hokekyo of the Daishonin is the Three Great Secret Laws? If so, should we be refuting the Hokekyo of Shakyamuni?

RH: Daishonin teaches that the Lotus Sutra preached by Shakyamuni is abstract and theoretical, while the Lotus Sutra as taught by Nichiren Daishonin himself is the great Law concealed within the depths of the Lotus Sutra. Rather than accepting what is abstract, you must seek the deeper meaning inside the sutra.

In general, ordinary people believe that Shakyamuni created the Law. But Daishonin explains that the Lotus Sutra itself states that Shakyamuni underwent austere practices himself as a human being, and then realized that this highest law existed for all mankind. Shakyamuni did not create the Law. Although this is not clearly written, when you read it and think about Shakyamuni’s purpose, you realize that Shakyamuni did not create the Law, thus you begin to understand that this is what is explained in the Lotus Sutra.

In society, people believe that because Shakyamuni preached the Lotus Sutra it has value. And because he is the one who created the Lotus Sutra, people worship him. In contrast, we believers in Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism¹⁸ worship Namu-myoho-rence-kyo as the object of worship and not

¹⁵ Hokekyo – the Japanese title of the Lotus Sutra.

¹⁶ Learning and Realization – (Jap. *Shomon and Engaku*) –the 7th and 8th of the Ten Worlds. Conditions of life where one sees the impermanence of all things and tries to free oneself from the sufferings of the six lower worlds by seeking a lasting truth.

¹⁷ Mappo – the Latter Day of the Law which began 2000 years after Shakyamuni’s death. The evil age when the true Law of Buddhism will flourish.

¹⁸ Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism – the religion founded by Nichiren Daishonin that believes in the Law of Namu-myoho-rence-kyo as the true Law of Buddhism, and in Nichiren Daishonin as the true Buddha.

Shakyamuni, because Shakyamuni realized during his ascetic practice that Namu-myoho-renge-kyo was the highest Law, and thus he became a Buddha. Nichiren Shoshu worships the Law that enlightened Shakyamuni. We do not worship Shakyamuni. Yet, we also don't reject him. We respect Shakyamuni because he established the theoretical Lotus Sutra. From the theoretical teaching we were able to find the key to the depths of the Lotus Sutra. The abstract teaching leads to the great Law concealed within the depths of Lotus Sutra.

B4: I was wondering about the concept of “borrowing words and phrases” when we recite Gongyo as praise of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo. When you do Gongyo, chanting the sutra parts, that is seen as “borrowing words and phrases in order to praise Namu-myoho-renge-kyo,” as well as refutation. When you chant the theoretical part of the sutra you are refuting the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, and when you chant the essential part of the sutra you're refuting the theoretical.

RH: The *Hoben* (2nd) chapter and the *Juryo* (16th) chapter explain how magnificent and beautiful Namu-myoho-renge-kyo actually is. *Hoben-pon* is the most important chapter in the first half, or theoretical teachings of the Lotus Sutra. The *Juryo-bon* is the most important chapter in the second half, or essential teachings of the Lotus Sutra. The *Hoben* chapter explains that the Buddha's life and the lives of all living things are equal. The *Juryo* chapter explains why all life is equal. The first fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra are called *shakumon*, or theoretical teachings, while the second fourteen chapters are called *honmon*, or essential teachings. The first fourteen chapters are the lesser teachings, while the second fourteen are the superior teachings.

So, why do we recite the *Hoben* chapter if it is a part of the lesser teachings? Because in the *Hoben* chapter, Shakyamuni sets out to explain and describe Namu-myoho-renge-kyo. The *Hoben* chapter is a truly wonderful chapter. Nevertheless, you cannot be enlightened through the *Hoben* chapter. The *Hoben* is the most important chapter in the theoretical teachings, but it does not teach that you can become enlightened. So the *Hoben* chapter is used to represent the wrong way, which must be discarded. In other words, the words of the second chapter are borrowed or made use of, but their meanings are not used or applied. The *Juryo* chapter talks about eternal life. The words of the *Juryo* chapter are not to be discarded. They are to be used and applied.

Here's an analogy. In Japanese airports there are displays which show real products next to imitations of the products. For instance, there will be a real Louis Vuitton bag side by side with a counterfeit Louis Vuitton. This is done so that the traveler can see and judge the difference in quality, and differentiate between what is real and what is fake. The *Hoben* chapter is employed in a similar fashion. The *Hoben* chapter describes the real thing, but it is not the real thing. Once you have the real thing, you discard that which is fake. The airport displays the products to show travelers how to protect themselves and what to look out for. That is why presenting the imitation of the wrong way is necessary.

Throughout the course of Nichiren Buddhism there has been an ongoing argument about this point. One side says, what use is teaching someone what is wrong, when the focus should be on teaching the correct way. The most important teaching of the Lotus Sutra is in the *Juryo* chapter, which teaches why all life is equal, and that life is eternal. On the other hand, there are some truths in the *Hoben* chapter. It teaches that all life is equal. But there are also some imperfections in the *Hoben* chapter. So there continues to be many arguments about the recitation of the *Hoben* chapter. Nichiren Shoshu insists that because Nichiren Daishonin read the *Hoben* chapter, we must therefore read it too.

Nichiren Shoshu recited the *se-o-ge* section of the *Hoben* chapter¹⁹ before the Soka Gakkai was formed. After the Soka Gakkai joined Nichiren Shoshu and became a force they told Taiseikiji to shorten Gongyo by eliminating the *se-o-ge* because Soka Gakkai members were poor and needed to work long hours and thus didn't have time for a long *Gongyo*. It is my belief that if the priests and lay believers at that time had thought about and given consideration to the meaning of two phrases from the *se-o-ge*—*ichidaiji innen* (the “one great reason” all Buddha make their advent), and *kai ji go nyu* (to open the Buddha wisdom to all beings, to show it, to cause them to awaken to it, and to enter into it)—then they would never have eliminated the *se-o-ge*.

Taiseikiji approved the abbreviated *Hoben* chapter because the *Hoben* chapter is a part of the theoretical teachings and is only provisional. In the early days, the Gakkai also scared believers by telling them if they recited the *se-o-ge* they would get sick. The Shoshin-kai says that even though it is a provisional teaching, the *Hoben* must be read in its entirety because it contains very important issues. I must admit, there are even some Shoshin-kai priests who say it is not necessary to recite the *se-o-ge*. Nonetheless, because Nichiren Daishonin emphasized the importance of reciting the prose section of the *Hoben*, it is correct to do so. The *Hoben* chapter is like the lower steps in a flight of stairs. After you've used the first, second, third...steps to ascend to the top, you might say you don't need the lower steps. But it would be foolish to throw away the lower steps, because you wouldn't be able to get down.

THE THIRD TREASURE *and* THE THREE VIRTUES

Reverend Raido Hirota

Mt. Holly, New Jersey

June 2007

QUESTION: Why do we need priests? The third treasure of the Three Treasures²⁰ is the *sangha* or community of believers, not priests.

RH: The title of the person who preaches Daishonin's teachings and leads people to enlightenment is not important. It doesn't matter whether that person is a priest or not. There are so many priests who have taught the wrong things and misled people. It is better not to have that kind of priest. Some say Taiseikiji priests, or priests of other religions are better than Gakkai leaders, just because they are priests. I think it's better not to have either of them if they are misleading people. Mr. Ikeda²¹ and many Gakkai leaders think the organization is especially important; that the organization is central and not Daishonin's teachings. Many of those leaders hide the fact that they make a living from the organization.

Any society or organization needs leaders: a president of a country; a teacher of a school; a president, a chairman or a boss of a company. These are all leaders. It is very important that these leaders fulfill their duty. Priests and Gakkai leaders must not have interest in personal gain. Gakkai leaders say you have to listen to them and do as they say. You should never be that kind of leader.

¹⁹ Se-o-ge section of the *Hoben* chapter – it follows the Junyo-ze. The first two line read: *Se o fu ka ryo / Sho ten gyu se nin.*”

²⁰ Three Treasures – the Buddha, the Law and the Priest.

²¹ Mr. Ikeda – Daisaku Ikeda, president of SGI.

Priests must not have interest in personal gain. They must fulfill their duty and endeavor to reflect on Daishonin's teachings of "following the Law not the person" (*eho fue nin*).

If you live your life having faith without interest of personal gain and perceive that you believe with a good heart, then all of you are leaders. If you are such a leader, then you will not be a subject of contempt.

You don't have to listen to someone preach just because he's a priest. If you question his substance or character you don't have to respect or listen to him. I myself do not think that just because I am a priest I can lead. Just as a conductor leads an orchestra, I assume responsibility to lead all believers who seek the correct practice to enlightenment.

A priest is someone who masters the principles of the Buddha's teachings. But "priest" also has another meaning, which is religious community or *sangha*, where people share the same beliefs and objectives. During Shakyamuni's time, Shakyamuni was the center of the *sangha*. He taught the principles of the Law to his disciples. He did not force or ask disciples to do anything they did not agree with. Ikeda and the Gakkai, on the other hand, ask, "Will you die for me?" You must not have that kind of substance or character. You will not find Ikeda's words, "Will you die for me?" anywhere in the Lotus Sutra or in Daishonin's goshu. There are no religious communities or organizations where you must listen to absolute guidance. Ninth High Priest Nichiu Shonin said, "It is not easy to practice alone. To aspire to personal enlightenment one needs a master and disciple relationship." In order to realize that you have Buddha's life in you, you must have the Law in the center of your life; you must confirm that each person has the Buddha's life within them; and you must encourage each other, guide each other and admonish each other. That is a religious community.

B5: Explain the master-disciple relationship a little bit further.

RH: In terms of seeking an understanding of faith, there is no discrimination between anyone who practices, whether it's a priest or a layperson. However, there is merit in having someone who has from an early age devoted him or herself to the practice and study of the teachings, and to the study of how to lead others in faith. These professionals, who have more experience and a deeper understanding have a role to play in guiding others to seek and gain a deeper understanding. It is not a matter of hierarchy.

I'll give you an example. When a ship sails across the ocean, there are two groups of people: one group is the passengers. They are the ones who pay the fare, get on board and take a trip. The other group is the crew—the captain, the pilot, the navigator, the engineer, etc—who make the ship move. Both groups are essential for the ship to sail. Having one group without the other, will not make the voyage possible. As you have seen by this example, one group alone cannot move the ship. In the same way, you cannot practice Buddhism on your own. In the case of the cruise ship, we need both a pilot and the passengers together. In the case of Buddhism, in order to become enlightened there needs to be a good teacher and a good practitioner working together towards a common goal. The common goal is the essential point of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings. It is that we come to understand that Namu-myoho-renge-kyo is at the center of our lives. This is something we must never forget.

Interestingly, and to the point, second High Priest Nikko Shonin said to his disciples and followers, "When I become old and demented, and start talking nonsense, don't follow me. Please abandon me." So, just because someone is the head of an organization, or introduced you to Buddhism, or someone has been practicing longer than you, there is no reason why you have to follow that person to the end.

B6: When it says the master-disciple relationship, who is the master?

RH: For me, when I first became a priest there was a teacher who guided me. He was my mentor—my teacher. For you, perhaps it's someone who introduced this Buddhism to you; or someone who guided you in the direction of a correct understanding of this Buddhism. In that sense, you don't have to think that there is only one person who is your mentor in life – your teacher in faith. In so many ways, all of us can support each other and advance together.

For instance, we have only one set of biological parents. If for any reason you lose one or both of your biological parents, you might later on have someone who parents you and fosters your development, and helps you to grow.

As you may know, and as we have discussed before, the Buddha has three qualifying attributes, virtues, or functions. They are sovereign (*shu*), teacher (*shi*) and parent (*shin*). In the case of teacher or mentor, the person who takes on this one element of the three virtues is that person's function in your life.

(In the Japanese language “teacher” usually means someone who leads someone else in an academic field, whereas “mentor” means someone who guides you in your life, and particularly in the Buddhist practice.)

Please keep in mind that these three attributes are not separate functions. They overlap each other. For instance, someone who teaches you how to form a successful business does not only teach how to make money. He will also teach about human relationships and how to deal with customers, etc.

B7: What is the definition of sovereign?

RH: The sovereign in the context of Buddhism is very different from the sovereign in Christianity. The sovereign in Buddhism would be more like a manager of a company.

B7: Who would be that sovereign?

RH: This person would be the Buddha. The sovereign is Nichiren Daishonin. In our daily life anyone can play the role of the three virtues. You may play the role of a mentor, or sovereign or parent to someone else. In terms of learning and studying Buddhism, anyone can play the role of these three functions. However, as we can see in the history of Buddhism, or the history of any religion, even though people have played such a role, it doesn't mean they have been right. Leaders have deceived people and led them astray. Unfortunately that is the reality.

B7: I guess the term “sovereign” then should be interpreted with the understanding that there is fallibility. Individuals are not necessarily infallible. I understand the mentor and parent aspects, but I was trying to understand the definition of sovereign. It sounds as if there is a superiority aspect that must be obeyed and followed.

RH: To be a sovereign, mentor or parent one must have some qualifications. Otherwise they cannot play one of these roles. Therefore it has to be someone you respect. Even though you may have learned something by age 6, if you are in the first grade of elementary school, you cannot be a teacher, a sovereign or a parent.

Here's an example. When I became a priest, there was a mentor who was officially assigned to me. Nonetheless, he was not always around to teach me what I should be doing, what I should be learning every minute of the day. There were 100 of us young priests living together and learning together and doing everything together. There was a young priest senior in faith to me who taught me exactly what to do everyday. So there wasn't just one person guiding me. Several people contributed to me going in the right direction. At the same time, you yourself become wiser and wiser. And sometimes your seniors may teach you something wrong, intentionally or unintentionally. You start developing wisdom to judge what is right and wrong. There are many people who are guiding you in life who play the role of your mentors. There may not only be one person.

If you read the sutra, you can clearly understand in Shakyamuni's teaching that there is no relationship for disciples of Shakyamuni to obey his teacher; to obey his mentor. It's more flexible. More dynamic. The relationship between Daishonin and his disciples is the same.

BUDDHIST HOLIDAYS

Reverend Raido Hirota

Mt. Holly, New Jersey

June 2008

QUESTION: What are the holidays of Nichiren Shoshu? Do we celebrate the birth of Nichiren Daishonin and the deaths of Nikko and Nichimoku?

RH: Our holidays are not national holidays in Japan because the majority of the population does not believe in Daishonin's Buddhism. But we have days to visit the temple, do Gongyo and daimoku,²² and listen to sermons by the priest about the significance of that day. Then we reflect on our faith and deepen our faith again. The dates are as follows:

January 1	First Gongyo		Tatsunokuchi
February 7	Nikko Shonin-e (Day)	September 23	Higan-e (Fall Equinox)
February 16	Daishonin's Birthday	October 12	Nichiren Daishonin's Oeshiki –Gotai-e
March 21	Higan-e -Spring Equinox	October 13	Daishonin's Goho-on – Repaying debt of gratitude to the founder
April 28	Risshu-e – <i>Rikkyo Kai</i> <i>Shu-e</i> - 1 st invocation of Namu-myoho-renge-kyo	November 15	Nichimoku Shonin-e
August 15	Urabon-e – Prayer for the deceased		
September 12	Tatsunokuchi honan-e – Persecution at		

²² Daimoku – Namu-myoho-renge-kyo, the title of the Lotus Sutra

- First day of each month – celebrating the day of the sutra
- 13th day of each month – Daishonin’s Ho-on oko – Lecture on repaying debt of gratitude to Daishonin

- 19th of each month – Daimoku ko – Daimoku Lecture

B3: How should we celebrate these?

RH: We celebrate by doing Gongyo together and reading appropriate teachings. I give lectures on the appropriate *goshō*²³ for the particular event. And we study a particular event in Daishonin’s life or in Buddhist history. Then we reflect on our own lives and make a resolution to carry on with faith and practice.

In the case of events related to 2nd High Priest Nikko Shonin and 3rd High Priest Nichimoku Shonin, I read the writings of these two priests for the specific occasion, and we share our thoughts.

B4: How should we celebrate *Urabon*²⁴?

RH: This is what we do in Japan: We make a stupa or tome out of wood. We write *Namu-myoho-enge-kyo* down the middle and the name of the deceased. Now this stupa represents the person. We chant for the person to become enlightened. Then we take the stupa to the person’s grave. This is how we celebrate the person’s life and pray for the enlightenment of the deceased.

B3: But we can’t do that. First of all, we can’t even write *Namu-myoho-enge-kyo* in Japanese. Does the stupa—the tome—have to be consecrated?

RH: Consecration is the duty of the priest. It is one of the traditional duties of the priest. What you can do is, in addition to daily prayers for the enlightenment of the deceased, on the anniversary of the deceased’s death you can compose a specific prayer for the person and say it at the end of the Fifth Prayer. You can also be more earnest in your prayer for the deceased’s enlightenment.

I don’t know how often you visit the gravesites of the deceased. In Japan, we often visit the tombs and pray for the deceased. That might be something for you to consider. If you think about it, if just one of your ancestor’s had not existed, you might not be here today. So you should be ever more humble and feel ever more grateful towards your ancestors for you having life because of them, and for being here today.

B6: When we go to the tomb to visit our deceased, should we do Gongyo there?

RH: Yes, do Gongyo at the tomb. In Japan, *Namu-myoho-enge-kyo* is engraved on the tombstones so you can see *daimoku* right there. Having *Namu-myoho-enge-kyo* on the tombstone indicates that this tomb is not just a monument to a person’s life or to a family; it is the symbol of the power of the Law which facilitates one’s enlightenment. That is why we call it a “*Daimoku Tower*.”

²³ Goshō – sacred writings of Nichiren Daishonin.

²⁴ Urabon – August 15 – prayer for the deceased.

GOSHO SELECTION

Excerpts

RECITATION OF THE HOBEN AND JURYO CHAPTERS²⁵

In the letter that you sent by messenger, you say that you used to recite one chapter of the Lotus Sutra each day, completing the entire sutra in the space of twenty-eight days, but that now you simply read the *Yakuo* chapter²⁶ once each day. You ask [if this is satisfactory, or] if it would be better to return to your original practice of reading each chapter in turn.

In the case of the Lotus Sutra, one may recite the entire sutra of twenty-eight chapters in eight volumes every day; or one may recite only one volume, or one chapter, or one verse, or one phrase, or one word; or one may simply chant the daimoku, *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo*, only once a day, or chant it only once in the course of a lifetime; or hear someone else chant it only once in a lifetime and rejoice in the hearing; or rejoice in hearing the voice of someone else rejoice in the hearing, and so on to fifty removes from the original individual who first chanted the daimoku.

In such a case, of course, the spirit of faith would become weak and the feeling of rejoicing much diluted, like the vague notions that might occur to the mind of a child of two or three, or like the mentality of a cow or a horse, unable to distinguish before from after. And yet the blessings gained by such a person are a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand times greater than those gained by persons of excellent innate ability and superior wisdom who study other sutras: persons such as Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Monju and Miroku, who had committed to memory the entire texts of the various sutras.

....

Even the wise or the learned, such as those who have pored over all the sacred teachings propounded by the Buddha in the course of his lifetime, and who have mastered both the exoteric and esoteric doctrines, are these days abandoning the Lotus Sutra and instead reciting the Nembutsu. What good karma must you have formed in the past, then, to have been born a person able to recite even so much as a verse or a phrase of the Lotus Sutra!

When I read over your letter, I felt as though my eyes were beholding something rarer than the udumbara flower, something even less frequent than the one-eyed turtle encountering a floating log with a hollow in it that fits him exactly. Moved to heartfelt admiration, I thought I would like to add just one word or one expression of my own rejoicing, endeavoring in this way to enhance your merit. I fear, however, that as clouds darken the moon or as dust defiles a mirror, my brief and clumsy attempts at description will only serve to cloak and obscure the incomparably wonderful blessings you will receive, and the thought pains me. Yet, in response to your question, I could scarcely remain silent. Please understand that I am merely joining my one drop to the rivers and the oceans or adding my candle to the sun and the moon, hoping in this way to increase even slightly the volume of the water or the brilliance of the light.

²⁵ *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. Six, pp. 3

²⁶ *Yakuo* Chapter – 23rd Chapter of the Lotus Sutra

First of all, when it comes to the Lotus Sutra, whether one recites all eight volumes, or only one volume, one chapter, one verse, one phrase, or simply the daimoku or title, you should understand that the blessings that result are in all cases the same. It is like the water of the great ocean, a single drop of which contains water from all the countless streams and rivers, or like the wish-granting jewel, which, though only a single jewel, can shower all kinds of treasures upon the wisher. And the same is true of a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand or a hundred thousand such drops of water or such jewels. A single character of the Lotus Sutra is like such a drop of water or such a jewel, and all the hundred million characters of the Lotus Sutra are like a hundred million such drops or jewels.

....

Therefore, when it comes to the Lotus Sutra, it is praiseworthy to recite any chapter you have placed your trust in, whichever chapter it might be.

....

Suppose that a man or a woman who recites even a single word of the Lotus Sutra should be destined to fall into the evil paths because of having committed the ten evil acts, the five cardinal sins, the four major offenses or countless other grave misdeeds. Even though the sun and moon should never again emerge from the east, though the great earth itself should turn over, though the tides of the great ocean should cease to ebb and flow, though a broken stone should be made whole or the waters of the streams and rivers cease to flow into the ocean, no woman who has put her faith in the Lotus Sutra would ever be dragged down into the evil paths as a result of worldly offenses.

If a woman who has put her faith in the Lotus Sutra should ever fall into the evil paths as a result of jealousy or ill temper or because of excessive greed, then Shakyamuni Buddha, Taho Buddha and the other Buddhas of the ten directions would immediately be guilty of breaking the vow they have upheld over the span of countless major kalpas never to tell a lie. Their offense would be even greater than the wild falsehoods and deceptions of Devadatta or the outrageous lies told by Kokalika. But how could such a thing ever happen? Thus a person who embraces the Lotus Sutra is absolutely assured of its blessings.

....

But to return to your question: As I said before, though no chapter of the Lotus Sutra is negligible, among the entire twenty-eight chapters, the Hoben chapter and the Juryo chapter are particularly outstanding. The remaining chapters are all in a sense the branches and leaves of these two chapters. Therefore, for your regular recitation, I recommend that you practice reading the prose sections of the Hoben and Juryo chapters. In addition it might be well if you wrote out separate copies of these sections.

The remaining twenty-six chapters are like the shadows that accompany a form or the value inherent in a jewel. If you recite the Juryo and Hoben chapters, then the remaining chapters will naturally be included even though you do not recite them. It is true that the Yakuo and Devadatta chapters deal specifically with women's attainment of Buddhahood or rebirth in the Pure Land. But the Devadatta chapter is a branch and leaf of the Hoben chapter, and the Yakuo chapter is a branch and leaf of the Hoben and Juryo chapters. Therefore, you should regularly recite these two chapters, the Hoben and Juryo. As for the remaining chapters, you may turn to them from time to time when you have a moment of leisure.