

Transferring Benefits through the Gohonzon (*Ekō*)

This month Oko is conducted also as a Mokushi-e ceremony which is the memorial anniversary for 3rd High Priest Nichimoku Shonin

After Nichiren Daishonin's death, Nichimoku Shonin served Nikko Shonin as Nikko Shonin had served Nichiren Daishonin. In 1289, the Second High Priest left Mount Minobu because of a conflict with the major land owner of that area, Hagiri Sanenaga, who had committed four slanderous acts against the Daishonin's teachings. Nichimoku Shonin accompanied Nikko Shonin to Mount Fuji, where the Head Temple Taisekiji now stands.

Today, Nichimoku Shonin is remembered for His spirit to practice and propagate True Buddhism even at the risk of His own life. According to one account, Nichimoku Shonin remonstrated more than forty-two times with the Kamakura government and the imperial court at Kyoto on behalf of Nichiren Daishonin and Nikko Shonin. In the entire history of Nichiren Shoshu, He was the first to exhort the imperial court.

We observe this memorial for Nichimoku Shonin to remind ourselves to wholeheartedly propagate Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with every word and deed. Because it was thought that November 15 was a particularly auspicious day, it was selected as a celebration of childhood as well.

In Nichiren Shoshu, children's ceremony has deep significance. Because children are the treasure of their parents and society, it is most important that they establish their connection to the Gohonzon of the Three Great Secret Laws. The children of Nichiren Shoshu believers must continue the heritage of their parents' faith in order to propagate the Daishonin's Buddhism worldwide. All children aged seven and under are invited to participate as attending parents join with the priest to pray for the prosperity and happiness of each child.

This ceremony conveys our gratitude for His unparalleled effort in fourteenth-century Japan, and also carries with it our hopes for the children of tomorrow, that they may grow to be as skilled in Buddhism and as strong in faith, wisdom, and knowledge as Nichimoku Shonin when they assume the leadership in the future.

In general, the purpose of Memorial Service is to pray that who have departed this life may attain Buddhahood. However, the Memorial Service to all the successive High Priests is to express one's sincere devotion and heartfelt gratitude, to make memorial offerings for the peace and happiness of the deceased (*ekō*) is to re-channel the good karma that we, ourselves, have accumulated to others, for their benefit. Through the great power of the Buddha and the Law within the Gohonzon, our good karma will manifest the life condition of Buddhahood and will reach the deceased.

Nichiren Daishonin states the following in the *Orally Transmitted Teachings* (Ongi kuden):

Now, when I, Nichiren, and my disciples offer our sympathy to the sacred lives of the deceased and recite the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, the infinite light of the Daimoku will

reach them and enable them to attain enlightenment in their present form (*sokushin jobutsu*). The memorial offering of prayer enables this to take place. (*Gosho*, p. 1724)

Here, the Daishonin teaches us that the memorial offering (*ekō*) that enables the lives of the deceased to attain enlightenment in their present form is none other than our faith and practice in the mystic Law (*Myōhō*) of the Buddhism of the sowing.

In other words, true memorial offerings are based on the awareness of the debt of gratitude that we owe to our ancestors and other deceased individuals, as we uphold faith in the Gohonzon of the essential teaching and continue to chant Daimoku.

Buddhism teaches the principles of cause and effect (*inga*) and karmic relationships (*innen*). It is not mere coincidence that we possess relationships as parents and children, as married couples, and as siblings. These are based on profound karmic bonds from the past.

Nichiren Daishonin states the following in the *Gosho*, *On the Urabon* (Urabon gosho):

Without attaining Buddhahood himself, he was unable to save even his father and mother. How much more difficult would it have been to save others? Accordingly, the venerable Maudgalyayana sincerely followed the teaching of the Lotus Sutra to “honestly discard the expedient means.” He rejected the entirety of the two-hundred-and-fifty precepts of the Hinayana doctrine and chanted Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō. Eventually, he attained Buddhahood and was named Tamalapattra Sandalwood Scent Buddha. Indeed, at this time, his parents also achieved enlightenment. Therefore, the Lotus Sutra states, “Then our wishes will be fulfilled and the longings of the multitude will likewise be satisfied.” Maudgalyayana received his physical body and mind from his father and mother. When he achieved Buddhahood in body and mind, his parents also attained the same.

(*Gosho*, p. 1376)

The Daishonin teaches that when we, ourselves, attain enlightenment in our present form through the benefits and good karma of believing in and practicing the mystic Law (*Myōhō*), the path will then open for us to be able to lead our parents, who supported us in body and mind, to enlightenment.

In the *Reply to the Wife of Gyobu saemon-no-jō* (Gyobu saemon-no-jō nyōbō-gohenji), the Daishonin states:

Those who want to repay their debt of gratitude to their parents should send them the Lotus Sutra. The teacher Shakyamuni sent the Lotus Sutra to his father and mother to repay them for his debt of gratitude....Certainly, the lives of those who have passed will quickly be separated from the filth of the six paths and advance to the pure land of Mount Sumeru. You must etch this doctrine into your hearts and tell them about it from time to time. (*Gosho*, p. 1506)

Thus, the foremost of all good karmic causes is the caring and filial piety toward our parents. It is all the more supreme because it is an offering based on Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō of the Three Great Secret Laws of the Latter Day of the Law.

The Urabon Sutra (*Urabon-kyō*, Sutra of the Festival of the Dead) tells the story of Shōdai-nyō, the mother of Maudgalyayana. She was greedy and cold hearted while alive and, as a result of her behavior, she fell into the life condition of hunger after death. Being greedy and cold hearted describes a person who is extremely covetous, does not care about anyone else, and is solely focused on one's own fulfillment. Someone who is greedy will definitely encounter the suffering of the life condition of hunger.

Maudgalyayana saw his mother Shōdai-nyo in such a state and tried to rescue her with the supernatural powers that he gained through his practice of Hinayana Buddhism. Because he was unsuccessful, he sought instruction from Shakyamuni.

Maudgalyayana followed Shakyamuni's directions and invited sagely priests from the ten directions and presented offerings to them. As a result, he was able to save his mother from the world of hunger for an entire kalpa. Although he was able to remove the suffering of the world of hunger for her, he was unable to elevate his mother's situation to a permanent life condition of enlightenment. Thus, he was unable to truly save her.

Why was Maudgalyayana unable to bring his mother fundamental salvation? It was because Shakyamuni had not as yet revealed the Lotus Sutra, and Maudgalyayana, himself, was unaware of the mystic Law. He had not yet attained the life condition of Buddhahood.

Then, Maudgalyayana attended the sermon on the Lotus Sutra, lasting eight years and representing the true purpose of Shakyamuni's advent into this world. While there, Maudgalyayana discarded the Hinayana precepts that he had embraced. Furthermore, he took faith in the Lotus Sutra and chanted Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo and came to be called the Tamalapattra Sandalwood Scent Buddha. At that time, his mother Shōdai-nyo was finally able to attain enlightenment.

Maudgalyayana had achieved the level of arhat, which is the highest position in Hinayana Buddhism, and he mastered supernatural powers. In the Goshō, *On the Urabon* (Urabon-goshō), the Daishonin teaches the important lesson that, even with such achievements, because the doctrine was erroneous, Maudgalyayana was definitely unable to save his parent and, in fact, caused her added suffering.

Some time ago, Honorable Retired High Priest Nikken Shonin presented us with the following guidance:

Ultimately, when we, as human beings, seek to become happy, this effort is contained within our struggle and determination to lead others to happiness. In particular, when we, ourselves, correctly try to bring true happiness to our ancestors or parents to whom we have great debts of gratitude, that effort and spirit directly turn into our faith and our spirit in performing our Buddhist practice.... We, ourselves, must follow this spirit and exert our utmost efforts in our faith and practice. Then, we can offer the benefits of our practice for ourselves and for others to our ancestors. It is most ideal for us to present our memorial offerings to our ancestors based on these benefits.

(*Dainichiren*, No. 469, p. 58)

In other words, a true memorial offering is based on understanding our debts of gratitude to our parents and ancestors. We must uphold correct faith that will appropriately manifest our debts of gratitude. First and foremost, we must advance in our Buddhist practice so that we, ourselves, can attain enlightenment in our present form, the life condition of absolute happiness. Then, based on the benefits that we receive as a result, we must make sincere memorial offerings, so that we also can lead the lives of the deceased to enlightenment in their present form.

At the end of Gongyo every day, we pray: "May the impartial benefits of Myoho-Renge-Kyo spread equally to the farthest reaches of the universe." Passages that contain the same meaning can be found in the Parable of the Phantom City (*Kejōyu*; seventh) chapter of the Lotus Sutra:

We beg that the merit gained through these gifts may be spread far and wide to everyone, so that we and other living beings all together may attain the Buddha way.

(*Hokekyo*, p. 268; *Lotus Sutra*, Watson, p. 130)

This passage means that we hope that the benefits and good karma of believing in and embracing Myoho-Renge-Kyo will be equally and fairly distributed among all people in the universe, so that we, together with others, can attain enlightenment without fail.

Currently, we are making great strides toward 2021 and our designated goal of establishing a Hokkeko organization of 800,000 believers, for the significant occasion of the 800th anniversary of the advent of our Founder Nichiren Daishonin. Let's rise to the occasion and propagate true Buddhism by doing shakubuku. Then, we can bring salvation to all people, who are suffering in the depths of the five impurities, and we can purify the land.

The Daimoku that we chant is none other than Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, based on the practice for ourselves and for others. Therefore, as we continue to advance with ever more vitality, we must never lose sight of the fact that putting forth our utmost efforts into chanting Daimoku and doing shakubuku is the fundamental basis of making memorial offerings for the deceased.