

Session 7 – October

Chapter 3: Faith and Practice

1. Three Proofs

The three proofs are three criteria for determining the correct teaching for leading people to absolute happiness. They demonstrate that the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin is the teaching that makes it possible for all people in the Latter Day of the Law to attain Buddhahood in this lifetime.

The three proofs are documentary proof, theoretical proof, and actual proof.

Documentary proof means that a religion's doctrines are based upon or in accord with its foundational scriptures.

Nichiren Daishonin writes: "One should accept what is clearly stated in the text of the sutras, but discard anything that cannot be supported by the text" (WND-1, 109). Doctrines not supported by documentary proof amount to no more than arbitrary interpretations or opinions. In the case of Buddhism, all doctrines must be supported by the sutras, or the teachings expounded by Shakyamuni. In the Soka Gakkai, the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, who practiced and embodied the essence of the Lotus Sutra, serve as documentary proof.

Theoretical proof, or proof of reason, means that a religion's doctrines and assertions are compatible with reason and logic. The Daishonin writes: "Buddhism is reason" (WND-1, 839). Buddhism respects and values reason. One should not, therefore, accept irrational arguments or interpretations.

Actual proof means that belief and practice of a religion's doctrines produce positive results in one's life and daily affairs and in society.

Religion is not just an abstraction; it exerts a powerful influence on people's lives. We can judge the merits of a religion by examining this actual impact.

The Daishonin writes: "In judging the relative merit of Buddhist doctrines, I, Nichiren, believe that the best standards are those of reason and documentary proof. And even more valuable than reason and documentary proof is the proof of actual fact" (WND-1, 599). As is clear from this statement, the Daishonin valued actual proof above all other forms of proof. This is because the original aim of Buddhism is to help people become happy.

A religion is not truly credible if it lacks any of these three forms of proof. To use an analogy, to be deemed safe and effective, any medicine must have a list of ingredients and their effects (documentary proof), a sound theoretical basis for being effective (theoretical proof), and, when taken, show real results in relieving the ailment it is intended to treat (actual proof).

Nichiren Buddhism has a basis that is objective and universally acceptable in terms of both theory and practical results.

2. Faith, Practice, and Study

The purpose of Nichiren Buddhism is to enable us to transform our lives. There are three basic elements in applying its teachings: faith, practice, and study.

Faith means belief in the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin—the correct teaching of the Latter Day of the Law—and in the Gohonzon, its ultimate expression. The central ingredient of Buddhist practice is faith.

Practice refers to concrete efforts to transform and develop our lives.

Study means learning and inquiring into the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. It provides us with guiding principles for proper faith and practice, helping us strengthen our practice and deepen our faith.

Correct practice of Nichiren Buddhism must include all three of these elements.

In “The True Aspect of All Phenomena,” the Daishonin says:

Believe in the Gohonzon, the supreme object of devotion in all of Jambudvīpa [the entire world]. Be sure to strengthen your faith, and receive the protection of Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions. Exert yourself in the two ways of practice and study. Without practice and study, there can be no Buddhism. You must not only persevere yourself; you must also teach others. Both practice and study arise from faith. Teach others to the best of your ability, even if it is only a single sentence or phrase. (WND-1, 386)

1) Faith

Faith is belief and acceptance—believing in and accepting the Buddha’s teaching. Such faith is the foundation for attaining the life state of Buddhahood.

In the Lotus Sutra, it is taught that even Shariputra, who was known as foremost in wisdom among Shakyamuni's disciples, could only grasp the essence of the sutra's teaching through faith. In the "Simile and Parable" (3rd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, we find the passage: "Even you, Shariputra, in the case of this sutra were able to gain entrance through faith alone" (LSOC3, 109–10). This is the principle of "gaining entrance through faith alone."

Only through faith can we attain the same great wisdom and life state as the Buddha. When we believe in and accept the Buddha's teaching, we can understand for the first time the correctness of the Buddhist philosophy of life.

Nichiren Daishonin, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, inscribed Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the fundamental law of the universe to which he had awakened, in the form of the Gohonzon. In other words, in the Gohonzon, he revealed his enlightened life state of Buddhahood for the sake of all people in the Latter Day of the Law.

Therefore, the most important thing in practicing Nichiren Buddhism is having deep faith in the Gohonzon as the object of devotion for attaining the life state of Buddhahood. When we have faith in the Gohonzon and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can tap the power of the Mystic Law in our lives and firmly establish the life state of Buddhahood within us.

2) Practice

Practice is the concrete actions we engage in based on faith in the Gohonzon.

Nichiren Buddhism teaches that Buddhahood, a life state of boundless wisdom and compassion, is inherent within our own lives.

The purpose of our Buddhist practice is to manifest our innate Buddhahood and attain a state of absolute happiness. To tap this latent potential and bring it to function in our lives, concrete efforts to transform and develop ourselves are essential. If we are to reveal our Buddhahood, we need to continue making efforts that accord with reason and correct Buddhist principles. This is what is referred to as practice.

Practice has two aspects—practice for ourselves and practice for others. These are compared to the two wheels of a cart: our practice must have both of these aspects to advance properly.

Practice for ourselves means striving to gain personal benefit from practicing Nichiren Buddhism. Practice for others is teaching others about Buddhism so that they may also receive benefit.

The Daishonin states: “Now, however, we have entered the Latter Day of the Law, and the daimoku that I, Nichiren, chant is different from that of earlier ages. This Nam-myoho-renge-kyo encompasses both practice for oneself and the teaching of others” (WND-2, 986).

In the Latter Day of the Law, both our practice for ourselves—seeking personal enlightenment—and our practice for others—sharing Buddhism with others so that they may also attain enlightenment—are based on practicing the fundamental teaching for attaining Buddhahood, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Therefore, correct practice in Nichiren Buddhism encompasses both these forms of practice. It consists of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith in the Gohonzon, while also teaching others about the benefit of faith in the Gohonzon and encouraging them to practice as well.

Specifically, practice for ourselves means doing gongyo (reciting excerpts of the Lotus Sutra and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo), and practice for others means sharing and spreading the teachings of Buddhism. In addition, the various activities we carry out as SGI members for the sake of kosen-rufu also constitute practice for others.

The Daily Practice of Gongyo and Efforts to Spread the Teachings

Gongyo refers to reciting portions of the Lotus Sutra and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo before the Gohonzon. This is the first of the two aspects of the practice for transforming our lives.

Comparing the practice of gongyo to polishing a mirror, the Daishonin writes:

This is similar to a tarnished mirror that will shine like a jewel when polished. A mind now clouded by the illusions of the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but when polished, it is sure to become like a clear mirror, reflecting the essential nature of phenomena and the true aspect of reality. Arouse deep faith, and diligently polish your mirror day and night. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (WND-1, 4)

As this metaphor indicates, the mirror itself doesn't change, but when it is polished, the way that it functions changes. Similarly, through our continuous daily practice of gongyo, we can polish and strengthen our lives and positively transform the way they function.

Referring to the importance of spreading the correct teaching of Buddhism, the Daishonin states in "The True Aspect of All Phenomena": "You must not only persevere yourself; you must also teach others. . . . Teach others to the best of your ability, even if it is only a single sentence or phrase" (WND-1, 386). And in "Letter to Jakunichi-bo," he says: "Those who become Nichiren's disciples and lay believers should realize the profound karmic relationship they share with him and spread the Lotus Sutra as he does" (WND-1, 994).

It is important that we not only seek to transform our own state of life through our daily practice of gongyo, but to share the teachings of Buddhism with others, even if only a single word, aiming for the happiness of both ourselves and others.

Such efforts help deepen our own faith and practice as well as activate the altruistic life states of Bodhisattva and Buddhahood within us—motivating us to work for the happiness and well-being of others. They enable us to become genuine disciples of Nichiren Daishonin. Along with doing gongyo, efforts to spread the teachings of Buddhism are also a powerful force for transforming our lives.

The Lotus Sutra states:

If one of these good men or good women in the time after I have passed into extinction is able to secretly expound the Lotus Sutra to one person, even one phrase of it, then you should know that he or she is the envoy of the Thus Come One [the Buddha]. He has been dispatched by the Thus Come One and carries out the Thus Come One's work. (LSOC10, 200–201)

Based on this passage, the Daishonin declares: "One who recites even one word or phrase of the Lotus Sutra and who speaks about it to another person is the emissary of Shakyamuni Buddha, lord of the teachings" (WND-1, 331).

In other words, the efforts we make in our practice for others' happiness are truly noble: they constitute the behavior and practice of the Buddha, which we carry out as the Buddha's emissaries.

Primary Practice and Supporting Practice

Our morning and evening practice of gongyo is a central pillar of our efforts to transform our lives.

In gongyo, we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith in the Gohonzon and recite excerpts from the “Expedient Means” (2nd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra and the verse section of the “Life Span” (16th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith in the Gohonzon is fundamental; it is therefore called the “primary practice.”

Reciting the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters helps bring forth the benefit of the primary practice; it is therefore called the “supporting practice.”

The reason we recite the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters is that these are the two most important chapters of the Lotus Sutra, which opens the way to enlightenment for all people. The “Expedient Means” (2nd) chapter explains the true aspect of all phenomena, the central doctrine of the theoretical teaching (first 14 chapters) of the Lotus Sutra. The “Life Span” (16th) chapter reveals the Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment in the remote past, the central doctrine of the essential teaching (latter 14 chapters) of the sutra. The Daishonin writes: “If you recite the ‘Life Span’ and ‘Expedient Means’ chapters, then the remaining chapters will naturally be included even though you do not recite them” (WND-1, 71).

Explaining the relationship between the primary practice and supporting practice, Nichikan, an 18th-century scholar of the Daishonin’s teachings, compared them to food and seasoning, respectively. He compared it to how, when eating rice or noodles, the “primary” source of nourishment, seasonings such as salt or vinegar are used to enhance, or “supplement,” the flavor. In similar fashion, reciting the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters, he said, helps bring forth the profound benefit of the primary practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which is why it is called the supporting practice.¹

In reciting the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters, then, we praise and enhance the beneficial power of the Gohonzon, the embodiment of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

3) Study

Study is the study of the Buddhist teachings, primarily reading the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and studying the correct principles and doctrines of Nichiren

¹ Nichikan, “The Practices of This School,” *The Six-Volume Writings*.

Buddhism. Through such study, we can develop a deeper, more solid faith, and also ensure that we practice correctly.

Without Buddhist study, we are at risk of lapsing into our own personal interpretations of Buddhism, and may easily be deceived by those presenting erroneous teachings.

As the Daishonin affirms when he writes, “Both practice and study arise from faith” (WND-1, 386), faith is the foundation of study.

President Toda said: “Faith seeks understanding, and understanding deepens faith.”² The purpose of studying and deepening our understanding of Buddhism, as he notes, is to deepen our faith.

The Daishonin urges his disciples to study his writings over and over. He writes, for instance: “Have him read this letter again and again, and listen attentively” (WND-1, 1031). In addition, he praises the seeking spirit of disciples who asked him questions about the Buddhist teachings.

Nikko Shonin, the Daishonin’s direct disciple and successor, stated: “Followers of this school should engrave the writings of the Daishonin in their lives” (GZ, 1618)³; and “Those of insufficient Buddhist learning who are bent on obtaining fame and fortune are not qualified to call themselves my followers” (GZ, 1618).⁴ In this way, he encourages us to study the Daishonin’s writings.

² Translated from Japanese. Josei Toda, *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda), (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1989), vol. 4, p. 18.

³ Article 11 of “The Twenty-six Admonitions of Nikko.”

⁴ Article 8 of “The Twenty-six Admonitions of Nikko.”