

# *The Practice of* **Nichiren Daishonin's** **Buddhism**

*‘Arouse deep faith and polish your mirror night and day. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.’*

Up to this point, we have looked at some of the basic principles of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. There is nothing in his teachings which contradicts reason. However, the purpose of his life's work was to enable people to become supremely happy in themselves and contribute to a creative and peaceful world. He established the practice whereby anyone can do this.

The value of a theory is demonstrated by the effect it has when put into action. For example, a doctor's education is valuable when he uses his learning for the sake of healing others. In fact, we refer to a doctor as practising medicine. The word practice is used in the same way when applied to Buddhism.

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism entails practice for oneself and others. Practice for oneself is gongyo, which means assiduous practice. It is done morning and evening, and consists of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as well as reciting sections of the Lotus Sutra.

We recite two key chapters of the Lotus Sutra as preparation for the main practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. These are the 'Expedient Means' (second) chapter which teaches that all people have innate Buddhahood and 'The Life Span of the Thus Come One' (sixteenth) chapter which reveals the eternity of life. When we do gongyo, we are praising the magnificence and wonder of life and expressing our appreciation for it.

Gongyo is at the same time easy and difficult. Because it is easy, it is accessible to anyone. Because it is difficult, we can revolutionise our lives. This twice daily assiduous practice is what enables us to base our lives on Buddhahood, rather than our deluded natures. Because of this it can be a struggle. We have to get up earlier; it always seems there are more important things to do when we get home; when we sit down to do it, sometimes we really do not want to be there. This is the daily struggle to break the chains of our own destiny. It is always important to remember that we are doing it for no one but ourselves. This is our own opportunity to

liberate ourselves from habitual behaviour which makes us suffer; to experience confidence, joy and freedom.

When we do gongyo, we leave behind our daily worries and devote time to ourselves. Before gongyo we may feel anxious or depressed, or short of time. During gongyo we experience the eternal, unchanging enlightened nature of the universe. We return our lives to the ultimate truth. After gongyo we can go about our tasks feeling refreshed. This twice daily rhythm is necessary in just the same way as we eat or sleep. Eating and sleeping refresh us physically and psychologically. Gongyo refreshes the universal self.

Practice for others means to introduce Nichiren Daishonin's teachings to others. This is important because it means taking action. The development of compassion is an essential aspect of our practice. In Buddhism, compassion (*jishi*) means to take away unhappiness and give happiness. It is not the same as charity, because charity usually means to take away unhappiness. Although this is valuable, it is far more valuable to give someone the means to change their lives for ever. We therefore teach people the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin. In fact, practice for others also benefits us, because we develop our compassion which is an enlightened quality. Similarly, gongyo is not solely for ourselves, but also benefits others as we chant for them and also master our own negative tendencies.

Study is also part of the practice for oneself and others. By studying the Buddhist teachings, we are able to explain the philosophy to others and also understand it ourselves. Study, in the Buddhist sense, is not academic learning but an aid to faith. In one of his writings, Nichiren Daishonin says:

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... Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.<sup>1</sup>

As this passage says, there are three elements to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism - faith, practice and study. Faith in Buddhism does not mean blind belief or passive acceptance. It refers to that realm of life which lies beyond the intellect. When our limited thinking tells us that things are hopeless, faith opens our hearts to other possibilities. As Nichiren Daishonin says:

What we call faith is nothing extraordinary. As a woman cherishes her husband, as a man will give his life for his wife, as parents will not abandon their children, or as a child refuses to leave his mother, so should we put our trust in the Lotus Sutra [the Gohonzon] ... and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.<sup>2</sup>

Faith is a natural quality of human life. We have faith that the sun will rise in the morning - in fact, we don't even think about it. But if we were to doubt all the things we take for granted in our daily lives, we would be living in a state of abject fear. Life would be terrible. In contrast, the more faith we have, the happier we are. We tend to think that faith means belief. However, when we start to practise, it is natural to have very little, if any, belief. More important than belief is a seeking mind. Our belief in the Gohonzon naturally grows as we experience the joy of practice.

In Buddhism, faith means a pure heart, a flexible spirit and an open mind. Faith is the function of human life to dispel the dark clouds of doubt, anxiety and regret, and sincerely open and direct one's heart towards something great. Faith might also be characterized as the power that enables the microcosm of the self to sense the universal macrocosm.<sup>3</sup>

Faith, it could be said, is the end result of practising. Absolute faith in the universal law of life - in ourselves, in others and in the universe - is the most open, secure and enjoyable state of life. Everyone wants this feeling of serenity, security and strength. In another sense, faith is the beginning, because without the ability to open our hearts to possibilities beyond our present experience, we would not be able to start practising.

There is a phrase in the first section of gongyo meaning 'bravely and vigorously' (*yu myo sho jin*):

Without such a brave and vigorous spirit, we cannot break the iron shackles of destiny, nor can we defeat obstacles and devils. Our daily practice of gongyo is a drama of challenging something new in our lives. When we bravely stand up with faith, the darkness of despair and anxiety vanishes from our hearts, and in pours the light of hope and growth. This spirit to stand up courageously is the spirit of faith.<sup>4</sup>

In this passage, 'obstacles and devils' refers to the resistance we meet when we try to move forwards. This is very natural. If we were to train as an athlete, we would get aches and pains in training. Other people also, when they see us trying to develop our lives, can feel threatened and try to stop us. At first, this may be off-putting. However, as our practice and faith become strong, we find that difficulties or opposition only serve to fuel our forward momentum. For example, when learning to ski, people avoid steep slopes. Expert skiers, however, relish the thought of difficult slopes and find them exhilarating.

When we practise Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism we are training ourselves for life. We do not seek to avoid hardship, but to become so strong in ourselves so that we can handle anything. Nichiren Daishonin advises us:

Never let life's hardships disturb you. After all, no one can avoid problems, not even saints or sages.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, as we practise for ourselves and others, we are seeking to establish a peaceful and creative society. Naturally this is difficult and full of challenges. The practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is in no way euphoric. We must always deal with the tangible reality which exists in front us. Only through dealing with reality can we prove the power of the Gohonzon in our own lives and for the sake of others. Only in this way can we change our destiny for the better:

In life, we must not permit ourselves to be absorbed only with immediate realities. We must have ideals and strive to achieve them, thereby transcending present realities. On the other hand, we must not allow ourselves to become alienated from reality. We can change nothing unless our feet are firmly planted on the ground.<sup>6</sup>

1 *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. 1, p. 95.

2 *Major Writings*, Vol. 5, p. 303.

3 Daisaku Ikeda, *Conversations and Lectures on the Lotus Sutra*, Vol. 1, p. 177.

4 Daisaku Ikeda, *Conversations and Lectures on the Lotus Sutra*, Vol. 1, p. 187.

5 *Major Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 161.

6 Daisaku Ikeda, *Conversations and Lectures on the Lotus Sutra*, Vol. 1, p. 104.