

Letter From Sado

by **Chrys Ruybal**
SGI-USA ESD Leader

When we read letters from Nichiren Daishonin, we want to understand what the letter says so we can learn how to become happy. It's also important to know why he wrote the letter we are reading and why he writes what he does. At the end of this letter, Nichiren writes, "I want people with seeking minds to meet and read this letter together for encouragement" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 306). So, why was it so important to Nichiren for members to gather together to read his letter?

Have you ever played the game "Telephone"? That is where a group gets in a circle, and the first person whispers a sentence into the ear of the second person. The second person whispers to the third person, and so on, until the last person says out loud what he or she heard. What the last person says is almost never exactly what the first person said. The first person may say something like, "I like to watch Sponge Bob." By the time it gets to the last person, it might sound like, "John likes to eat popcorn."

In the game, everyone is in the same room, and it doesn't take very long to get around the circle. If information can get so mixed up like that, just imagine how mixed up it can get if the people are

so far away from each other that it takes weeks or months for one person to tell the next.

In Nichiren's time, there were no phones, TV, newspapers or Internet. There were no cars, buses, trains or planes. So, the only way that information was passed along was by people traveling to deliver messages. Not only could the information get mixed up, but also it could take so long that the situation could have changed by the time a person heard about it. That was why Nichiren wanted his followers to read the letter together—so that everyone got the same information at the same time.

As the title says, this letter was written from Sado Island. People who wanted Nichiren to stop talking about Nam-myoho-renge-kyo had arrested him and sent him away to this island. At that time, Sado Island was a very difficult place to live, and he didn't have much to eat. It was cold, and he didn't have warm clothes. He didn't even have a decent place to live. He had to stay in a tiny hut where the wind blew right in on him.

Nichiren spoke up against the people who sent him there, because they had the power to help regular people. Instead, they only thought about themselves. So, those people were angry with Nichiren; it was not likely that they would help him. The people who sent him to Sado did not

expect him to survive. They thought that people would forget about him and quit chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Nichiren knew this, and even though his own life was in danger, he was just thinking about all of his followers. He wanted them to know the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, because chanting it helps us bring out our best qualities. He was also concerned that some people might be wondering why he was having difficulties in the first place. They might be thinking that if Nam-myoho-renge-kyo were so powerful, he should be having an easier life. Nichiren spent his time on Sado writing many letters to explain how Buddhism works and sending encouragement so that his followers would not be afraid of obstacles and would keep chanting to reach their dreams.

Nichiren was always thinking about the future. Even though he never met us, he knew we were coming. He knew that if we practiced Buddhism correctly, we would experience difficult times. He also knew that as human beings, we might get discouraged and maybe even wonder if chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is such a good thing. Even though he was struggling so much, he wrote this letter to help us understand Buddhism and give us hope that we can make our lives really great.

So, now you know a little bit about what was going on when Nichiren wrote this letter. Next time, we'll look at what he said in a letter about how to become happy.

Don't miss it.

The Year of The **Total Victory of Soka** and the **Dynamic Development of Youth**

What are your goals and determinations for 2010?



BUDDHIST BASICS: The Altar

By Chrys Ruybal
SGI-USA ESD Leader

Nichiren Buddhists have an altar in their homes. It is the place in our house where we recite the sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. It is where we keep and protect the Gohonzon. We will learn more about the Gohonzon later. For now, know that it is the scroll we look at when we chant. It is a picture of enlightened life, and how we take care of it and the area it is in shows respect for the Gohonzon and for our own lives, as well.

In addition to the box where the Gohonzon hangs, there are other items on the altar. These are offerings or gifts we make to show our thankfulness and respect for what the Gohonzon represents.

People put greens in a vase on the altar; sometimes they have two vases, one on each

side. The greens look nice and remind us that life is eternal. They stand for purity and our ability to form a positive relationship with the environment. This allows us to show our Buddha nature.

Fresh water is offered each morning before reciting the sutra. It is taken away in the evening before reciting the sutra. We don't need to waste the water; some people pour it into a cup and drink it. Others use it to water a plant. All life needs water. In India, where Buddhism began, it is very hot, and traditionally, water has great value in that country. Water is also used to purify or clean.

We also need food to live. Just as we might offer a guest something to eat, we offer food, usually fruit, to the Gohonzon to show our appreciation and respect. Since the Gohonzon doesn't actually eat what we offer, we take it off the altar and eat it ourselves.

We have candles on the altar. They can be wax or electric. The light from the candles helps us to see. In Nichiren Daishonin's time, they didn't have electricity. The light also represents the wisdom of the Buddha. That same

wisdom exists in us. So, the candles remind us of our own Buddha nature.

Burning incense makes the air smell nice. It helps to create a feeling of peacefulness. It also represents truth or purity.

Ringing the bell makes a nice sound. When we ring the bell, we are making an offering of sound. When a group of people chant together, the bell helps them start and stop together.

We don't actually offer prayer beads, but we use them when we chant. They help us focus and remind us to hold our hands together. There are 108 beads, and they represent our desires.

Nichiren wrote, "Whether you chant the Buddha's name, recite the sutra, or merely offer flowers and incense, all your virtuous acts will implant benefits and roots of goodness in your life" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 4).

The most important part of our altar is the Gohonzon. And chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the most important offering we can make.

If you want to learn more about the altar, go to: www.sgi-usa.org/newmembers/resources/thealtar/altar.swf

Things To Look for on an Altar

All these words are items that can be found on an altar. Can you find them all in the puzzle to the right?

Water

Candles

Gohonzon

Incense

Greens

Bell

Fruit



'Letter to the Brothers'

By **Chrys Ruybal and Michael Petkov**
SGI-USA ESD Leaders

Soon after Nichiren Daishonin began teaching people to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to become happy, a young man named Munenaka became one of his followers. That young man shared Nichiren Buddhism with his brother, Munenaga, and the two of them practiced together.

The brothers were from a wealthy family. Their dad was a powerful man, and their future should have been secure. There was a problem, though. Their dad was a friend to Ryokan, a priest who did not like Nichiren. Since Ryokan didn't like Nichiren, the brothers' dad didn't like him either. Their dad decided to make his sons stop chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. He tried many things, including disowning his older son.

To be disowned meant that the father no longer considered Munenaka his son. That was very serious. Munenaka would lose money and property. Their dad tried to get the brothers to go against each other by offering to give everything to the younger brother. But the brothers never gave up, and they chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo no matter what their dad did. In the end, their father actually began to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, too. It took the brothers more than 20 years to change their father's heart.

Can you imagine working on something like this for that long? Would you get discouraged? Do you think you might wonder if maybe you were not practicing correctly? Would you wonder if maybe chanting didn't work? Nichiren was concerned for these two brothers, and he wrote to encourage them to not give up. In "Letter to the Brothers" he writes, "You must grit your

teeth and never slacken in your faith" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 498). Changing our karma isn't such an easy thing to do. Sometimes it takes a while to overcome a problem.

SGI President Ikeda writes: "Our determination in faith pervades [spreads through] the entire universe. The prayers of those working for kosen-rufu can therefore make anything happen. Even though at times it may seem as if our prayers aren't being fulfilled [answered], if we keep chanting earnestly, things will move in the best possible direction for our lives without fail. Everything in life has meaning. We will definitely be able to attain happiness in the depths of our lives that will endure [last] throughout the three existences of past, present and future" (March 12 *World Tribune*, p. 5).

So the next time you have a problem that is taking too long (and they all seem to), remember what Nichiren and President Ikeda have taught us, and keep moving forward.

Want to Learn the Fan Dance?

Find instructions for the fan dance at www.sgi-usa.org/youth/esd
Click on "Dance of the Disciples" on the lefthand side of the page.



Using Our Obstacles To Fly

by **Chrys Ruybal**
SGI-USA Elementary School
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As we learn about Buddhism, we learn about obstacles, devils, fundamental darkness and some devil king of the sixth heaven. Do you wonder what they are? Do those words seem scary? Well, first of all, let's make it clear that there aren't creatures running around trying to scare or hurt us. Actually, an obstacle or a devil is anything that can get in our way or make us feel as if we should give up on our dreams. And guess what? They are a natural part of our Buddhist practice. They are a good thing.

In "Letter to the Brothers," Nichiren Daishonin talks about a passage from a Buddhist teacher named T'ien-t'ai: "As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils emerge in confusing form, vying with

one another to interfere . . . One should be neither influenced nor frightened by them" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, 501). So Nichiren is telling us that as we move toward our happiness, we will meet resistance. This idea exists in everyday life. Think of an airplane. As long as it sits on the runway, not moving, there is no resistance. But as soon as it takes off, there is resistance from the air. If the airplane stops as soon as it feels resistance, then it won't go anywhere. It won't be able to fulfill its function. If, however, the resistance is met with more force or speed from the airplane, that very resistance actually helps the plane to lift off the ground and fly.

So what about us? How can we use resistance? Well, first of all, we can use it to prove to ourselves that we are making progress in our lives; we are moving toward our goals and our happiness. Pushing past our obstacles makes us stronger and gives us a chance to see what happens when we

chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. When this happens, we get to create experiences in faith. For example, let's say you want to be selected for a team. You try out, but don't make it. Of course you feel disappointed, but what happens next? Do you give up? Do you tell yourself that you didn't really want to be on that team? Is there a voice inside you that says: "Why did you even try? You're just not good enough"? That voice is your own fundamental darkness, what we call a "devil." If you listen to that "wind of resistance," you will be like the airplane just sitting on the runway, not going anywhere. But if you decide to chant to have more confidence, you will have that. You might also get some ideas of ways you can improve your skills, and you will have the determination to try again and to keep trying until you win. Then, not only will you be on that team, you will also have an experience you can remember for yourself, and you can share that experience with others. You will have defeated a devil.

And like that airplane, you will have used that resistance to help your life fly.

What do you think about when you do the Dance of the Disciples? Are you trying to keep in time with the music? Do you count how many times you flip the fan or which direction to turn when you do the stomping part? Those are important things to think about. Here are some other things you might think about:



<< MOVEMENT Starting with the fan in front of your chest and then opening your arms wide
WHAT YOU MIGHT BE THINKING I might have a small body, but my life force is as big as the universe. **SURPRISE!**

>> MOVEMENT Sweeping your fan back and forth and in a circle
WHAT YOU MIGHT BE THINKING I share Buddhism with my friends to help spread it everywhere.



<< MOVEMENT Stomping your foot
WHAT YOU MIGHT BE THINKING I am determined. I stomp out all my problems.



>> MOVEMENT The final pose when your arms are up in a "V"
WHAT YOU MIGHT BE THINKING I am a winner!



Whatever you think about, please know that your dancing will put hope in the hearts of all the people watching you!

What is the Gohonzon?

by Michael Petkov
SGI-USA Elementary School
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We chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon every day. But what is it? Why do we do that?

The Gohonzon is like a mirror. Mirrors are really helpful things. You can use one to see how your clothes look, or to see if your hair is the way you want it. You can see how long your tongue is. You can make funny faces and see what you might look like when you're angry or happy or excited. Also, if you use two mirrors you can even see what the back of your head looks like. However, with that kind of mirror you can just look at your physical form.

The Gohonzon, on the other hand, is a mirror to help you see who you are as a person. Down the center of the Gohonzon are the words *Nam-*

myoho-renge-kyo and *Nichiren*. All around it are the names of Buddhas and different kinds of beings. They represent all the different aspects of your life, including your Buddha nature. Through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon, you get to bring out your strength, wisdom and courage. You get to experience the highest condition of life. Nichiren Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon so that everyone, no matter who they are, could bring out their highest life-condition, and then use it for their own good and everybody else's, too.

The Gohonzon doesn't bring out your potential by itself though. You have to take the action to chant and determine to reach your goal. Nichiren writes: "Never seek this Gohonzon outside yourself. The Gohonzon exists only within the mortal flesh of us ordinary people who embrace the Lotus Sutra and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" (*The Writings of*

Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1, p. 832). Just like you wouldn't expect a mirror to make your clothes look nice or fix your hair for you, the Gohonzon doesn't change your life for you. Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon allows you to see and believe that you have a Buddha nature. The Gohonzon helps you activate that Buddha nature; like plugging in a lamp. Then, you can decide to live using your Buddha nature for both yourself and others. That is what Nichiren means when he says "embrace the Lotus Sutra."

As you work to change your life and your world, you will definitely experience obstacles. Remember, your Buddha nature is always in your life even though you may not always be feeling wise or strong or courageous. You can always go back to the Gohonzon and chant, and bring out the strength you need. As you do that again and again, you will come to have confidence that you are a Buddha, and you will be able to make your life shine no matter what.



ESD Members Across the Country

(Counter clockwise from top) Elementary school division members show their fans in California; ESD members practice the fan dance in New York; ESD members in California practice the Dance of the Disciples; ESD members participate in the May Commemorative Contribution activity; A young man graduates into the junior high and high school division.

Buddhist Study

by **Chrys Ruybal**
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Study is such an important part of our Buddhist practice that Nichiren wrote, "Without practice and study, there can be no Buddhism" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 386). To help us study, we will have an article here on page 4 of *Friends for Peace* each month. To find out how much we have learned, we will hold a review in October. Here are some terms that will be on our exam.

Nam-myoho-rence-kyo

When Shakyamuni taught the Lotus Sutra, he shared ideas that no one had heard of before. He taught that we can all overcome our sufferings, and that we all have the same potential [ability] to become enlightened. For a while, just hearing Shakyamuni's teachings helped people change their lives. But over thousands of years, some people forgot the message of the Lotus Sutra and

focused on some of Shakyamuni's earlier teachings that didn't lead all people to Buddhahood.

When Nichiren Daishonin was a young man, he wondered why people were no longer able to overcome their sufferings through Buddhism. He felt that something must be wrong, so he studied all of Shakyamuni's teachings and discovered that people weren't following what Shakyamuni had taught. Nichiren figured out that the title of the Lotus Sutra contained the wisdom of the whole teaching. That title is Myoho-rence-kyo. But Myoho-rence-kyo is more than just a title; it is the universal Law of cause and effect. Nichiren went a step further and added the word *Nam* to the title. *Nam* means to dedicate one's life.

So, when we chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, we are dedicating our lives to the fundamental Law of the universe. This brings out our wisdom, our kindness and our respect for all life. This lets us become the greatest we can be.

Faith, Practice and Study

Practice is a word that has different meanings. It can be something that is done according to the customs of a religion. Or, it can be the act of doing something over and over again to get better at it. As Nichiren Buddhists, we do both. We practice Buddhism every day to help us get better at living our lives. Our practice is chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo and reciting the sutra. We do this for our own lives, and we also help other people do it, too. We study Nichiren Daishonin's and SGI President Ikeda's writings to help us understand how to use our Buddhist practice in our daily lives. As we get results from using our practice, we develop faith, which is a belief or trust in the power of our practice of chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. It works like a circle. One part leads to the next, and we need them all to practice correctly. We do this daily so that we can get better at it. We might even say that we practice our practice.



ESD Members From Around the Country