

## Understanding the drama and profound reality of the Gohonzon

*This is a participatory study exercise for SGI meetings, created by SGI South Africa in Cape Town. Please enjoy it as much as we did!*

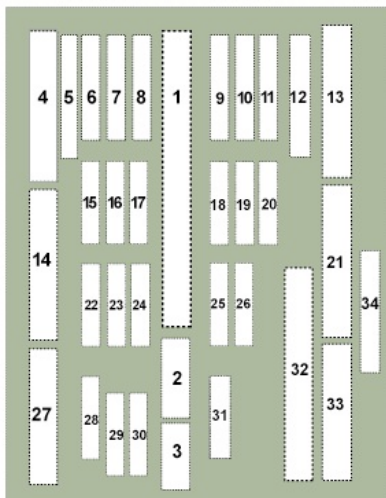
### Notes for facilitators

To help explain the meaning and depth of the Gohonzon, you will be organising 34 people to stand in a pattern corresponding to the layout of the characters and entities appearing on the Gohonzon. All those people will then read out and dramatise the names and identities of all those entities on the Gohonzon, so bringing the drama of this great mandala and of the Lotus Sutra, vividly to life.



1. Print out the “characters of the Gohonzon” listed further below, and cut them into slips of paper, each carrying one numbered explanation.

2. Write out the numbers 1–34 on slips of paper.



3. Before the meeting starts, organise a physical space that follows the structure of the Gohonzon.

In Cape Town, we created four levels using a stage and benches, but it could also be done on a flat floor. Set out the slips of paper with numbers to reflect the structure of the Gohonzon, as shown in the diagram.

4. Explain the exercise to members, hand out the explanation slips, and ask them to find the corresponding numbers on the floor. (Consider

giving no. 20 to someone with a flair for the dramatic!) If you don't have 34 people, no problem – just lay out the surplus explanations on the floor as well and ask some people to read more than one explanation.

*Once everyone has arranged themselves, get started by reading the introduction to the exercise below:*

### **Introduction by facilitators**

The Lotus Sutra is the pinnacle of Shakyamuni's Buddhism, and its essence was captured by Nichiren Daishonin in the Gohonzon, which represents the magnificence of life illuminated by the Mystic Law of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

Think of the Lotus Sutra as an amazing allegorical movie, filled with drama on an incomprehensible scale, spanning all existence and all time, well beyond the scale of the known universe. It is the record of a great assembly of multitudes of beings, humans, gods, demons and others. In this movie are elements of great drama, particularly the revelations that all living beings can attain enlightenment without exception, and that Shakyamuni's own enlightenment transcended his historical lifetime, that he was in fact enlightened eons before in other worlds, so showing that Buddhahood is inherent to all life.

Of the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren Daishonin wrote that it is “the king of sutras, true and correct in both word and principle. Its words are the ultimate reality, and this reality is the Mystic Law (myoho)” (WND 1, p. 3).

So what happens in this great movie? One event is particularly important, and spans several chapters. In the 11th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, an extraordinary thing occurred. As the sutra tells us:

At that time in the Buddha's presence there was a tower adorned with the seven treasures, five hundred yojanas in height and two hundred and fifty yojanas in width and depth, that rose up out of the earth and stood suspended in the air. – LS, p. 170

Then a Buddha called Many Treasures appears, seated within this Treasure Tower to bear witness to the truth of Shakyamuni's teachings in this Lotus Sutra. Shakyamuni assembles all the Buddhas from throughout the universe. He then opens the Treasure Tower and at Many Treasure's invitation, joins Many Treasures in the Treasure Tower. All the members of the great assembly wish that they could join him, and he immediately raises them into the air as well. This

begins the so-called Ceremony in the Air.

The graphic arrangement of the Gohonzon is based on the concept of this Ceremony in the Air.

Regarding the Treasure Tower, the second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, said:

Within our lives exists the magnificent state of life beyond our comprehension called Buddhahood. This state of life or its power defies our imagination; nor can our words express it. However, we can concretely manifest this state in our lives. To explain that our lives can manifest the latent Buddha nature as a concrete reality is the [purpose of the] ceremony depicted in 'The Emergence of the Treasure Tower' chapter.

President Ikeda introduces the Lotus Sutra by saying that:

The Lotus Sutra teaches of the great hidden treasure of the heart, as vast as the universe itself which dispels any feelings of powerlessness. It teaches a dynamic way of living in which we breathe the immense life of the universe itself. It teaches the true great adventure of self-reformation.

The Lotus Sutra has the breadth and scope to embrace all people on the way to peace. It has the fragrance of magnificent culture and art. It leads us to an unsurpassed state of life imbued with the qualities of eternity, happiness, true self and purity, so that wherever we are, we may say, 'This, my land, remains safe and tranquil' (Lotus Sutra 16, p. 230). – Daisaku Ikeda, *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra I*, p. 14.

So, if the Lotus Sutra is like an amazing movie, the blockbuster of ultimate reality, the Gohonzon is rather like a movie poster, containing the title, the essential characters, and other elements of the grand drama, ready to be absorbed in a moment.

*Now ask everyone to read out their positions and characters in order.*

## The characters of the Gohonzon

1. I represent the characters Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the title of the Lotus Sutra, the highest teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha, and of all Buddhas, transcending time and space and all existence.

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2. I am Nichiren Daishonin, founder of the Buddhism upon which you in the SGI base your activities. I inscribed the Gohonzon, the true object of worship for the observation of one's mind and established the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as a universal practice to attain enlightenment. Below me on the Gohonzon is my personal seal.

3. Here is that seal, the characters read "Zai-Gohan".

4. I am Great Heavenly King Vaishravana, one of the four great Heavenly Kings. We form the four corners of the Gohonzon, and I always protect the place where the Buddha preaches and listen to the Buddha's teachings.

5. The characters I represent state that, "Those who make offerings will gain good fortune surpassing the ten honorable titles of the Buddha."

6. I am Bodhisattva Firmly Established Practices, one of the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. I represents happiness, the unshakable state of a life filled with joy.

7. I am Bodhisattva Pure Practices, one of the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. I represent purity; the pure state of life that is never swayed by circumstances.

8. I am Shakyamuni Buddha. For fifty years, I taught, expounding various sutras (teachings), before teaching the Lotus Sutra, the essence of which is represented here on the Gohonzon. In the 14th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, I declared that it is my ultimate teaching, saying, "Among the sutras, it holds the highest place", "that it shines the brightest", "that it is the most honoured". Of course, I represent the Tenth World of Buddhahood.

9. I am the Buddha Many Treasures Thus Come One. Some of you remember my name as Taho Buddha. In ages past, I lived in the world of Treasure Purity in an eastern part of the universe. I pledged that, even after I had entered nirvana, I would appear, in the Treasure Tower, and attest to the validity of the Lotus Sutra wherever anyone might teach it. And so I appeared here now, seated within the Treasure Tower, at the Ceremony in the Air to bear witness to the truth of Shakyamuni's teachings in the Lotus Sutra.

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10. I am Bodhisattva Superior Practices, one of the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. I represent the virtue of true self. With the other Bodhisattvas here, I represent the Ninth World of Bodhisattva and the noble paths of Learning and Realisation.

11. I am Bodhisattva Superior Practices, one of the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. We appeared in the 15th chapter of the Lotus Sutra. I represent the virtue of true self.

12. I am Bodhisattva Boundless Practices, also one of the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. I represent eternity, one of the four virtues of the Buddha's life.

13. Here it is written that, "Those who vex and trouble [the practitioners of the Law] will have their heads split into seven pieces." This sounds extremely dramatic, but it means that we create great misfortune for ourselves when we ignore cause and effect, and disrespect our lives and the lives of others.

14. I am Great Heavenly King Upholder of the Nation, one of the Four Heavenly Kings. I live halfway down the eastern side of Mount Sumeru, the legendary mountain at the centre of the world. In the twenty-sixth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, I pledge to protect those who embrace the sutra.

15. I am the Buddhist God Wisdom Craving-Filled. I purify people's earthly desires and free them from illusions and the sufferings accruing from earthly desires. I represent the teaching that "earthly desires are enlightenment".

16. I am the stars. I am Great Heavenly King Stars, one of 12 legendary gods in Buddhism.

17. I am the Moon, Great Heavenly King Moon.

18. I am Heavenly King Shakra, also known as Heavenly King Indra, one of 12 gods said to protect the world. Originally the god of thunder in Indian mythology, I was later incorporated into Buddhism as a protective deity. In the first chapter of the Lotus Sutra, I joined the assembly on Eagle Peak, accompanied by 20,000 retainers.

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19. I am Great Heavenly King Brahma, I live in the first of the four meditation heavens in the world of form above Mount Sumeru. In Indian mythology, I was regarded as the personification of the fundamental universal principle (Brahman).

20. You all know me well... Every time you start to doubt yourselves, or to doubt your faith in Buddhism, I am right besides you. Every time you disregard the dignity and humanity of others, I am there. I am – the Devil King of the Sixth Heaven!! I am the king of devils who dwells in the highest of the six heavens of the world of desire and I delights in manipulating others to do my will. I lust for power. I make free use of the fruits of others' efforts for my own pleasure. I am served by innumerable minions, works to obstruct Buddhist practice and delight in sapping the life force of other beings. I am the last one of “the three obstacles and four devils”, a manifestation of the fundamental darkness inherent in life. But even I must change my nature when faced by a truly courageous practitioner of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and then I too serve the Buddha.

21. I am the Sun, Great Heavenly King Sun.

22. I am Wisdom King Immovable. I serve you by defeating the obstacles and evils that hinder Buddhist practice.

23. I am not just one, but Eight Great Dragon Kings. We live at the bottom of the sea, and we too, each of us with many followers, assembled at the ceremony on Eagle Peak to hear the Lotus Sutra.

24. I am the Great Teacher Dengyo, founder of the Tendai sect in Japan, in the ninth century. In 804, I went to China accompanied by my disciple, Gishin, and studied T'ien-t'ai's Buddhism under a disciple of Miao-lo. In 805, I returned to Japan and the next year established the Tendai sect. I taught that all people have the Buddha nature and that the supreme vehicle of Buddhahood expounded in the Lotus Sutra is the true teaching. I was one of the inspirations for the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin.

25. I am the Ten Demon Daughters, daughters of the female demon Kishimojin. We are Ramba, Biramba, Crooked Teeth, Flowery Teeth, Black Teeth, Much Hair, Insatiable, Necklace Bearer, Kodai, and Robber of the Vital Spirit of All Living Beings. In the twenty-sixth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, we all pledge to protect those who live and teach the sutra. And the Buddha told us that by protecting those who uphold the name of the Lotus Sutra, that is, Myoho-renge-kyo, our benefit will be immeasurable.

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26. I am Kishimojin, the Mother of Demon Children. According to legend, in the time of Shakyamuni, I killed the babies of other people to feed my children, and the terrified and grieving populace begged Shakyamuni for help. The Buddha then hid my youngest son, Binkara. I looked for him throughout the world for seven days, but to no avail. In despair, I finally asked the Buddha where he was. Shakyamuni rebuked me for my evil conduct and made me vow never to kill another child. In the 26th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, I and my ten daughters pledged before the Buddha to protect the votaries of the Lotus Sutra.

27. I am the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, also called Chih-i), I expounded the theory of "a life-moment possessing 3,000 realms", or *ichinen sanzen*, which include the Ten Worlds represented on this Gohonzon by all these various gods and deities.

28. I am another of the four great heavenly Kings, the Great Heavenly King Increase and Growth.

31. I am Nichikan Shonin, the twenty-sixth high priest in the lineage from Nichiren Daishonin, and I worked in the 18th century to clarify the teachings during a time when errors and misconceptions had become widespread. I inscribed this version of the Gohonzon that you in the SGI now all receive.

31. I am the Sun Goddess in Japanese mythology, a protective god in Buddhism, I protect the prosperity of those people who have faith in the Law.

32. Here it is written that, "Never in 2,230-some years since the passing of the Buddha has this great mandala appeared in the world."

33. I am Great Heavenly King Wide-Eyed, one of the Four Heavenly Kings.

34. Here is the date that Nichikan inscribed this version of the Gohonzon, June 13, 1720, or in the traditional Chinese zodiac, the year of the Yang element of Metal and the Rat.

Facilitator: There we have it, good men and good women – final proof that, as Nichiren Daishonin assured us, our lives are the Gohonzon!

*Most of the text of this exercise is adapted with thanks from the explanation of the Gohonzon appearing on the SGI USA website, (accessed September 2011), which is there attributed in turn to Living Buddhism 11/97.*



### **Nichiren Daishonin's own explanation of the Gohonzon**

This mandala is in no way my invention. It is the object of devotion that depicts Shakyamuni Buddha, the World-Honored One, seated in the treasure tower of Many Treasures Buddha, and the Buddhas who were Shakyamuni's emanations as perfectly as a print matches its woodblock. Thus the five characters of the Lotus Sutra's title are suspended in the center, while the four heavenly kings are seated at the four corners of the treasure tower. Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are side by side at the top. Seated below them are the bodhisattvas, including Universal Worthy and Manjushri, and the voicehearers, including Shariputra and Maudgalyayana. [Beside them are] the gods of the sun and moon, the devil king of the sixth heaven, the dragon king, and an asura. In addition, the wisdom kings Immovable and Craving-Filled take up their stations to the south and north. The evil and treacherous Devadatta and the ignorant dragon king's daughter form a group. Not only the Mother of

Demon Children and the ten demon daughters, who are evil demons that sap the lives of people throughout the major world system, but also the Sun Goddess, Great Bodhisattva Hachiman, and the seven reigns of the heavenly gods and five reigns of the earthly gods, who are the guardian deities of Japan— all the various great and small gods, that is, the main gods, are ranged in rows. How then could the remaining subordinate gods be left out? The “Treasure Tower” chapter states, “[Shakyamuni Buddha used his transcendental powers to] lift all the members of the great assembly up into the air.”

Without exception, all these Buddhas, bodhisattvas, great sages, and, in general, all the various beings of the two worlds and the eight groups<sup>2</sup> who appear in the “Introduction” chapter of the Lotus Sutra dwell in this Gohonzon. Illuminated by the light of the five characters of the Mystic Law, they display the dignified attributes that they inherently possess. This is the object of devotion. – “The Real Aspect of the Gohonzon”, Writings of Nichiren Daishonin I, p. 831