



Myohoji Temple

Did You Know? #14

The Toba Memorial Tablet

When you visit your local Nichiren Shoshu Temple you will probably notice that in the sanctuary, next to the main altar there is a second, smaller altar usually on the right hand side. It has the offerings of water, evergreens, an incense burner, and a candle. Above these offerings are slots or spaces to place memorial tablets. At the front is a large powdered incense burner. The purpose of this Memorial Altar is for the offering of *Toba* Memorial Tablets for the benefit of the deceased. This is a very significant aspect of the practice of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

The *Toba* takes the form of five levels which signify the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and *ku* (non-substantiality). The bottom level of the *Toba*, shaped like a square, represents earth. The second level is in the shape of a circle, representing water. The third level, denoting fire, is a triangle. The fourth level, in the shape of a semicircle represents wind. At the top of the *Toba* is the level representing *ku*. It is shaped like a jewel signifying the “treasure of fulfillment.” The Daishonin taught that all phenomena in the universe are composed of these five elements. This, of course, includes the human body. Therefore, the *Toba* signifies the body of the deceased.

These five levels of the *Toba*, and the five elements also correspond to the five characters of Myo-Ho-Ren-Ge-Kyo. The Daishonin teaches in the “Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings” (*Ongi Kuden*):

Our head represents *Myo*, the throat is *Ho*, the chest is *Ren*, the womb is *Ge*, and the legs are *kyo*. This five-foot body of ours is, indeed, the manifestation of the five characters of the Mystic Law, Myoho-Renge-Kyo. (*Shinpen*, p.1728)

The Daishonin also states in the Goshu, “On the Ultimate Teaching Affirmed by All Buddhas:”

The five elements are earth, water, fire, wind, and *ku*. ...These are, in other words, the five characters of Myoho-Renge-Kyo. (*Shinpen*, pp. 1418-1419)

The five levels of the *Toba* also signify the body of the Buddha. When we chant sincere Daimoku to the Gohonzon for the enlightenment of the deceased, we, ourselves can attain enlightenment. In addition, the deceased, who cannot chant Daimoku for themselves, gain tremendous benefit from the Daimoku we chant for them. This is the principle behind the *Toba* Memorial Service. The True Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin stated:

The deceased rely on the benefits of offerings from their relatives. So you should offer your benefit to them to relieve their suffering.

(*Shintei Goshō*, Vol. 1, p. 72)

On the *Toba* is inscribed Myōhō-Renge-Kyō. There is also an inscription in Chinese characters stating, “Here exists the body of the Buddha.” Under the Daimoku is the name of the deceased, and on the reverse side is inscribed the name of the person who requested it.

Requests for a *Toba* are done in writing at your local Nichiren Shōshū Temple, or the Temple you are visiting. If you wish to offer a *Toba* at the Head Temple during Tozan pilgrimage, you may make your request in the *Tobashitsu* (the *Toba* office next to the *Mutsubo*) on the Head Temple grounds. If you don’t live near a Nichiren Shōshū Temple, you can make your request by mail.

The *Toba* Request Form asks for the date you want the *Toba* to be offered, the name of the deceased and the name of the person making the request. Your relationship to the deceased (such as father, aunt, friend, pet dog) and the date of death should be written on the application which is submitted with an offering of *Gokuyo*. Because the *Tobas* are individually inscribed by the priest, put your requests in early.

It is best if the believer making the request can be present at the Temple when the *Toba* is offered to the Gohonzon. The Priest and the believer then can pray in unity for the enlightenment of the deceased. If this is not possible, the Priest will offer the *Toba* in your absence.

The Offering of Powdered Incense at the Memorial Altar

The recitation of the Sutra will begin. The offering of powdered incense begins during Part B of Gongyō. It is *not* appropriate to wait until the sutra recitation is finished and offer powdered incense during the chanting of Daimoku, or during the silent prayers. If, however, there are so many people that it is not possible to finish before Daimoku starts, an exception is made. Chant silently when approaching the Memorial Altar.

- With palms together, face the Gohonzon, silently offer three Daimoku and bow.
- Then face the Memorial Altar, silently offer three Daimoku and bow.
- Take a small pinch of incense powder between two fingers, gently raise the hand holding the incense slightly above eye level as a gesture of respect, and place the incense powder on the charcoal in the burner. This is done three times.
- Face the Memorial Altar, offer three silent Daimoku and bow. Face the Gohonzon, repeat the three silent Daimoku and return to your seat.

There is tremendous benefit in offering a *Toba* Memorial Tablet. Through the power of the Mystic Law we are able to reach and affect the life of the deceased. The Daishonin states:

You erected a sixteen-foot *sotoba* with the seven characters of Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō inscribed on it. ...Your deceased parents must be illuminating the pure land as brilliantly as would the sun and moon in the heavens. Furthermore, you yourselves, their filial son and his wife, as well as your children, will live to be one hundred and twenty. (*MW*, Vol. 5, p. 299, *Shinpen*, p. 1434)