

# Service for the Deceased

I deeply appreciate you wish for this service to respect and mark the transition of your relationship with the deceased. To perform this service I am greatly aided by a full name and dates of birth and death as well as a good picture (portrait) of the deceased. I use these to create a placard to display at the Butsudan to focus my thoughts and energies toward the Samsaric entity that the deceased expressed in this Saha World.

Donations are very much also appreciated and can be made in person or online to PayPal by using the link at; <https://www.paypal.me/sifusylvain>

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It is my full intention when performing Gongyo with Daimoku and the recitation of Nichiren Goshu, to honor the individual in memorium as they influence the current momentum of the lives within whom they have and continue to affect. The incalculable and innumerable influences and interactions of Karma, attitude, and intentions are very much alive in each living being that interacted with them. We too, continue to interact, via our karma, intermixed and expressed within our married karmic amalgams with the deceased. It is for the purpose of resolving any issues remaining in our karma of the relationship with the deceased, that this ceremony is to address. It is for our relationship with the deceased to be nurtured and moved to gratitude for the teaching we were to learn from the deceased, as their gift to our lives, and to release all obstacles to this realization. By doing so, we continue to learn and appreciate their influence, memory, and renew our appreciation for all those we interact with.

I like to invoke the following writing from Nichiren to remind us of the human experience of life;

## **A Ship to Cross the Sea of Suffering**

A passage from the Lotus Sutra reads, "...as though one had found a ship to make the crossing." This "ship" might be described as follows: The Lord Buddha, a shipbuilder of infinitely profound wisdom, gathered the lumber of the four tastes and eight teachings, planed it by honestly discarding the provisional teachings, cut and assembled the planks, using both right and wrong, and completed the craft by driving home the spikes of the one, supreme teaching. Thus he launched the ship upon the sea of suffering. Unfurling the sails of the three thousand conditions on the mast of the Middle Way doctrine,

driven by the fair wind of "all phenomena reveal the true entity," the vessel surges ahead, carrying all believers who can enter Buddhahood by their pure determination. Shakyamuni Buddha is the helmsman; Taho Buddha mans the sails, and the four Bodhisattvas led by Jogyo strain in unison at the creaking oars. This is the ship in "a ship to make the crossing," the vessel of MyoHo-RenGe-Kyo. Those who board it are the disciples and followers of Buddha. Believe this wholeheartedly.

With my deep respect, Nichiren

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To those for whom this ceremony is dedicated to ancestors I provide the following writing of Nichiren;

## **The Origin of the Service for Deceased Ancestors**

You went to the trouble to send me by messenger a donation for the service for your deceased ancestors of one to of polished rice as white as snow, a bamboo container of oil like well-aged sake, and one thousand coins. In particular, I was very much moved by the contents of your letter.

The service for deceased ancestors has its origins in the events arising from the Venerable Maudgalyāyana's attempts to save his mother, Shōdai-nyo, who, because of her karma of greed and stinginess, had fallen into the world of hungry spirits for a period of five hundred lifetimes. He failed, however, to make his mother a Buddha. The reason was that he himself was not yet a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and so he could not lead even his mother to Buddhahood. At the eight-year assembly on Eagle Peak, he embraced the Lotus Sutra and chanted Namu-myoho-renge-kyo, and became Tamalapattra Sandalwood Fragrance Buddha. At this time, his mother also became a Buddha.

You also asked about offerings for the hungry spirits. The third volume of the Lotus Sutra says, "Suppose that someone coming from a land of famine should suddenly encounter a great king's feast." This passage is explaining that the four great voice-hearers, who were of intermediate capacity, had not yet even

heard of the delicacy called ghee, but when this sutra was expounded, they savored its taste to their hearts' content for the first time, thus bringing an end at once to the hunger that had long been in their hearts. Therefore, when you make offerings to the hungry spirits, you should recite that passage from the sutra and chant Namu-myoho-renge-kyo for their repose.

Generally speaking, hungry spirits are divided into thirty-six kinds. Among these, caldron-shaped hungry spirits are ones with no eyes or mouth. If you ask what sort of cause from the past exists for this, it is because, while they were in this world, they did such things as attacking people under cover of night or committing robberies. Vomit-eating hungry spirits feed on what people have vomited up. The cause of this is the same as that mentioned above. It is also because they robbed people of their food. Thirst-consumed hungry spirits are ones that drink things like the water that people offer out of filial piety to their deceased parents. Property-possessing hungry spirits are ones that drink the water from horses' hooves. This is because, while alive, they begrudged their property and concealed their food. Property-less hungry spirits are ones who have not heard even the name of food or drink since the time of their birth.

Law-devouring hungry spirits are people who renounce the world and spread Buddhism. They think that if they preach the Law people will respect them, and because of their ambition for fame and profit, they spend their entire present lifetime striving to be thought of as better than others. They neither help other human beings nor have a mind to save their parents. Such people are called Law-devouring hungry spirits, or hungry spirits who use the Buddhist teachings to satisfy their own desires.

When we observe the priests of our time, we find some who secretly accept offerings for themselves alone. In the Nirvana Sutra they are described as dog-like priests. In their next life they will become ox-headed demons. We also find persons who, though they receive offerings openly, being greedy, never share them with others. In their next existence they will be born as horse-headed demons.

Also, some lay believers fail to pray for the repose of their parents who, having fallen into hell or the realm of hungry spirits or of animals, are undergoing excruciating agonies. These believers are luxuriously clad and fed, have an abundance of cattle, horses, and retainers, and enjoy themselves as they please. How their parents must envy and resent them! Even among priests, those who pray for the repose of their parents and teachers on the anniversaries of their death are rare. Certainly the gods of the sun and moon in the heavens and the deities on earth must be angry and indignant with them, considering them to be unfilial. Though they possess a human form, they are like animals. They should also be called human-headed beasts.

When I think that I will surely eradicate these karmic impediments and in the future go to the pure land of Eagle Peak, though various grave persecutions fall on me like rain and boil up like clouds, since they are for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, even these sufferings do not seem like sufferings at all. Those who have become the disciples and lay supporters of such a Nichiren—especially your deceased mother, Myōhō, the anniversary of whose death falls on the twelfth day of this month—are votaries of the Lotus Sutra and my lay supporters. How could she possibly have fallen into the world of hungry spirits? No doubt she is now in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha, and the Buddhas of the ten directions. Perhaps they are saying, “So this is the mother of Shijō Kingo!” and, with one accord, patting her on the head and praising her joyfully. And she is probably saying to Shakyamuni Buddha, “What a splendid son I have.”

The Lotus Sutra says: “If there are good men or good women who, on hearing the ‘Devadatta’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, believe and revere it with pure hearts and harbor no doubts or perplexities, they will never fall into hell or the realm of hungry spirits or of beasts, but will be born in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions, and in the place where they are born they will constantly hear this sutra. If they are born among human or heavenly beings, they will enjoy exceedingly wonderful delights, and if they are born in the presence of a Buddha, they will be born by transformation from lotus flowers.” The phrase “good women” is found in this passage of the sutra. If it does not refer to the deceased, Myōhō, then to whom does it refer? The sutra also states, “This sutra is hard to uphold; if one can uphold it even for a short while I will surely rejoice and so will the other Buddhas. A person who can do this wins the admiration of the Buddhas.” My praise of your mother counts for little, but the sutra says that she “wins the admiration of the Buddhas.” Thinking, “How encouraging, how encouraging!” you should apply yourself earnestly to faith. *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo, Namu-myoho-renge-kyo.*

With my deep respect,

Nichiren

The twelfth day of the seventh month

Reply to Shijō Kingo

## **Background**

This letter was written to Shijō Kingo, a samurai and one of Nichiren Shonin’s most loyal followers, in the seventh month of the eighth year of Bun’ei (1271). Shijō Kingo had sent various offerings to Nichiren as a donation for a memorial service to be held for his mother, who had passed away some years before on

the twelfth day of the seventh month. Nichiren wrote Kingo this letter in reply, explaining that, in the profoundest sense, only the act of chanting Namu-myoho-enge-kyo benefits the deceased.

Traditionally held in Japan on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the service for deceased ancestors is a Buddhist observance honoring the spirits of the ancestors. This tradition originated in China and is based on the story of Maudgalyāyana's saving his deceased mother that is related in the Service for the Deceased Sutra. Records indicate that the service for deceased ancestors was first held in China in 538, and in Japan in 657. Recent scholarship has established that the Service for the Deceased Sutra has its origins not in India, but in China, where filial piety was highly valued.

According to popular belief in Kamakura-period Japan, those who were greedy or egotistic in life would inevitably suffer from hunger in death. In this letter, Nichiren discusses the various kinds of hungry spirits mentioned in Buddhist texts and explains the causes, that is, the evil acts they committed in past existences, that led them to acquire these forms.

Nichiren also exposes the true motives of many of the priests of his day, referring to them as "Law-devouring hungry spirits" who use the Buddhist teachings as a means to gain personal fame and profit. Though they pretend to have a sincere desire to preach the Buddhist teachings, in their hearts they are greedy. They conceal the offerings they receive from others, keeping them to themselves. Nichiren also censures those Buddhists, whether of the priesthood or of the laity, who neglect to pray for the repose of their deceased parents or teachers.