

Question: What is Ushitora Gongyo?

Answer: Ushitora Gongyo is conducted every morning at the Head Temple Taisekiji. Ushitora Gongyo is referred to as the Gongyo officiated by the High Priest as Master of the Seat of the Law, in the Reception Hall (*Kyakuden*) at the Head Temple at 2:30 AM. In “Articles to be Observed after the Passing of Nikko,” which the Second High Priest Nikko Shonin entrusted to the Third High Priest Nichimoku Shonin, it states:

Perform Gongyo and await the time of kosen-rufu.

(*Gosho*, p. 1883)

Ushitora Gongyo has been conducted ceaselessly since Head Temple Taisekiji was established in 1290, from the time of Second High Priest Nikko Shonin. The High Priest performs Ushitora Gongyo every morning at 2:30 AM—in the middle of the night—for world peace and for all living beings to attain enlightenment. The Chinese characters for “*ushi*” (ox) “*tora*” (tiger) are difficult but I would like to explain the significance depicted by the characters.

First, Ushitora indicates a specific time. Most of you probably leave the house by 8:00 AM for school or work and take a lunch break around noon. At present, we indicate time through numbers, but in ancient Japan, time was illustrated through 12 zodiac signs for the date, time, and direction. The 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac are rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and boar. The hour of the ox refers to the period between 1:00 AM and 3:00 AM and the hour of the tiger refers to the period between 3:00 AM and 5:00 AM. At 1:00 in the morning, it is still pitch black. At 5:00, dawn starts to break and many people start to rise. Hence, this transitional time when darkness becomes light, and living beings start to awaken from deep slumber, corresponds to the hours of the ox and tiger. This time period is considered deeply significant in Buddhism and is referred to as the time when all Buddhas of the three existences attain enlightenment. Therefore, at the Head Temple, at this hour, Ushitora Gongyo is recited every day.

Next, Ushitora Gongyo also indicates direction. We all know that the sun rises from the east and sets in the west. The north winds tend to bring chilling weather while the southern tropical islands offer a warmer climate. Within the east, west, south, and north direction, the direction of Ushitora is mid-way between the north and east quadrant. This direction is also known as the direction of the Demon Gate. Historically, the direction of the Demon Gate has been considered to carry special significance in Buddhism. In actuality, in India, China, and Japan, the center of Buddhism has oftentimes been located to the northeast of the capital. When believers make a pilgrimage to Head Temple Taisekiji, the view of Mt. Fuji from the Temple grounds is breathtaking isn't it? Mt. Fuji is actually

located to the northeast of Taisekiji; therefore, from the standpoint of Buddhism, this also holds deep significance.

What exactly is recited during Ushitora Gongyo? During Ushitora Gongyo, similar to morning Gongyo, all five prayers are recited. Nowadays, all five prayers are recited in front of our altar at home. In the past, at Taisekiji, however, the five prayers originally were recited while moving around to five different temple locations. It was much stricter in the past.

After the High Priest completes the recitation of Gongyo facing the *Ozagawari* Gohonzon in the Kyakuden, he then moves to the *Yohaijo*, the smaller altar that is located on the west side of the main altar. There, he does an additional recitation of the sutra. The High Priest recites the *Hoben-pon*, *Jigage*, and chants Daimoku while facing the Dai-Gohonzon, which is enshrined in the Hoando Sanctuary. This recitation facing the Dai-Gohonzon from a distance is referred to as “*yohai*.” After completion of the recitation, the High Priest then moves to the Mutsubo and recites morning Gongyo, and with this, Ushitora Gongyo is completed.

The younger priests from middle school on up to high school and priests-in-training rotate and accompany the High Priest. Just imagine the difficulty of having to do this while attending school! Although members regularly do not observe Ushitora Gongyo, the important point is for all Nichiren Shoshu believers to recite diligently morning Gongyo everyday.

What time do you perform morning Gongyo? Even if you are exhausted, just remember that there are people performing Gongyo in the middle of the night when they are much more tired. Keeping this in mind, let's all do our best to be disciplined in our daily practice.