"Deep Zange" by Richard Causton

This article was originally published in the UK Express in March 1979.

"Sincere repentance will eradicate even fixed karma, to say nothing of karma which is unfixed"(On prolonging One's Life Span, WND, p954).

What does Zange really mean? Most people would answer, "It means apologizing to the Gohonzon". "But apologizing to whom and for what?" we reasonably reply. "After all, Gohonzon isn't God, so why should I have to apologize, especially if it is for something I did in a past life which I don't even know about? Sounds like Confession!"

Yet the Gosho persists: "Even with small slanders," the Konichibo Gosho reads, "If you do not do Zange you cannot avoid falling into the evil paths. But even if you committed heavy slander, if you do Zange then you can expiate your sins"(Gosho Zenshu, p926). The Gosho, On Curing Karmic Disease', declares, "The Nirvana Sutra, referring to the Lotus Sutra states: 'Even the offense of slandering this correct teaching [will be eradicated] if one repents and professes faith in the correct teaching....No teaching other than this correct teaching can save or protect one. For this reason one should take faith in the correct teaching"" (WND, p632).

What then, does Zange truly mean and how can we actually do it, deep in our lives? Those who have felt that Zange sounds like confession can certainly be fully excused for their misconceptions, for Zange, a word used in ancient Buddhist scriptures, was adopted much later in history by Christian missionaries in Japan as meaning "to regret past sins and confess them to a priest or God". It is not surprising therefore, that for us born into the Christian tradition in the West, Zange can easily be misinterpreted.

The original Buddhist definition of this word however, is totally different. It is contained in the Bodhisattva Fugen Sutra and reads as follows: "If you wish to do Zange sit upright and meditate on the true entity of life". This is further defined in Buddhist terms as pondering the cause of your past slander and sin due to your ignorance and illusions about life. Thus by realizing the true aspect of your life and revealing your Buddha wisdom, you can then do Zange."

In other words, rather than apology, Zange is to recognize with your whole heart and with deep regret, that your present suffering is due to an inherent cause in your life, which not only led you to slander the Gohonzon in your past lives but also continues to cause you to do so in this life. In this context, to understand the true meaning of Zange it is necessary to appreciate three important points:

A. That Buddhism explains in the Ten Factors of Life that the Law of Cause and Effect manifests itself in four different ways. They are:

Nyoze-in, Nyoze-en, Nyoze-ka and Nyoze-ho " the inherent cause, the external cause, the latent effect and the manifest effect. As an example of this, if you stir what looks like a glass of pure water with a spoon and it becomes murky, the cause of its murkiness is not the spoon (which is the external cause) but the fact that there is dirt in the water (inherent cause). Thus what Buddhism is concerned with is not the spoon but the dirt in the water, which is our unhappy karma. From this it becomes clear, that it doesn't matter in the least what we actually did in the past, i.e., the external cause, hating someone or stopping someone from practicing; what matters is the inherent cause which made us behave like this, because this same inherent cause may still exist deep in our life and therefore is causing us suffering now.
B. Slandering the Law is not only speaking against Buddhism, hating someone, preventing someone from practicing or causing disunity among members; even though these may be some of its most evil forms. Slander is in fact any action which involves disrespect for life. Thus pollution, injustice, misusing another person's possessions or money and of course, murder and other criminal acts, are all slander. Even to misuse one’s body by eating and drinking too much is slander. Because we all possess the six lower worlds, especially the Three Evil Paths in our lives, we cannot, in fact, help committing small slanders even when we are practicing, which is one of the main reasons why "practice like flowing water" is so important; thereby we continually make great causes which offset our inadvertent slander.

C. Whereas there can be a myriad different forms of external causes of slandering the Law and it is usually quite impossible and indeed, truly unnecessary and undesirable to try to imagine which particular ones we committed in the past, the inherent cause is in fact, unbelievably simple and fundamental. It is one of the Three Poisons which beset our lives and every other human life in this world. In other words, it is greed, anger or foolishness towards the true meaning and nature of life itself; that ignorance breeds not only blind stupidity but fear especially fear of the unknown. Why should we suffer from greed or anger or fear? There is only one answer isn't there? We are greedy and try to grab all we can in this life; we manifest anger in the form of arrogance or contempt because we wish to wield power; we are fearful and lack confidence in ourselves erecting barriers and screens to hide our true nature only because we doubt (in other words, slander) the unlimited power of the Gohonzon and especially that it exists nowhere else but in ourselves.

If we knew without a shadow of doubt that the Gohonzon, the Buddha state, the source of all courage, wisdom, compassion and good fortune shines within us, then greed, anger, foolishness and fear, would naturally be overcome as well as the sufferings we are undergo because of them. This is exactly as the Lotus Sutra declared, "If you wish to do Zange, sit upright and meditate on the true entity of life, and all your offences will vanish like frost and dewdrops in the sunlight of enlightened wisdom". The true entity of life is of course the Gohonzon or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Perhaps it is now becoming clear to the reader that deep Zange is the process of:

1. Pondering the true aspect of our lives in our daimoku, realizing that the only possible cause which can have the effect of preventing us from seeing our Buddha nature at work must always be past slander.

2. Realizing that this same inherent cause still exists in our life today because we were born with it as part of our karma having not overcome it in our previous lives. Hence we are continuing to slander deep in our lives, thus perpetuating this suffering.

3. Recognizing that the only way to overcome the effects of this poison is to struggle to fully trust the Gohonzon and bring ourselves to realize above all, that the Buddha nature actually exists in us. In other words to understand what is meant by the words in the Gosho:

"At present the entire body of the Honourable Abutsu is composed of the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space. These five elements are also the five characters of the daimoku. Abustu-bo is therefore the Treasure Tower itself and the Treasure Tower is Abutsu-bo himself" (WND, p299).

4. Through this recognition of the true cause of our sufferings, to regret our arrogance and ignorance with our whole hearts. This very act of deeply regretting is a quite natural and spontaneous reaction to our discovery that our sufferings are due to nothing else but slander the Gohonzon and the teachings of Nichiren.
5. Determining with a deep sense of gratitude for the good fortune which has led us to the Gohonzon in this life, to work for kosen-rufu wholeheartedly exactly as the Buddha taught from now on, in order to feel and realize the full power of the Gohonzon while asking for actual proof of the Buddha nature working in us. We can ask, "Please Gohonzon, let me believe in you."

6. Through this actual proof, freeing our Buddha nature from the awful constriction of our slander and doubts, thereby finding true and lasting joy in life and in the limitless power of the Gohonzon.

This is the process often described as "reflection, repentance, appreciation, determination and devoted practice which is called Zange".

Thus true Buddhism with its brilliant light, penetrates beyond surface matters and external causes, to the depths of life, to the very source of our agony, turning sufferings into enlightenment and poison into medicine as we determinedly chant daimoku; not with lingering guilt but with resolve that we will feel and realize that the Buddha state is active in our lives. As we do so the ignorance on which greed, anger and fear have fed themselves for so long, disappears as our faith grows stronger. We become free.

"If the Japanese repent in their present existence, they will be like King Ajatashatru who became a follower of the Buddha, cured his white leprosy, and prolonged his life by forty years; though lacking the roots of faith, he reached the first stage of security, and in his present life gained realization that phenomena are neither born nor perish" (WND, 618).

It is of course, valuable to do a form of Zange every day during gongyo, expressing our sincere regret for any slander we have committed, knowingly or unknowingly, in the past. Needless to say, this should be heartfelt, not automatic and should always be followed by our fresh determinations to fulfil the Buddha's will for kosen-rufu. However it is important we realize that this is not the deep Zange as described in this article. This is a most profound experience in that it is directed towards a particular aspect of our karma and brings about a radical change in our lives, through actual proof of our Buddha nature at work in an area in which we have never seen it in action before. Indeed it is this actual proof living vividly in our minds that will prevent this tendency to slander from taking control of our minds again.

We may need to do such a deep Zange again to change our karma in some other area of our lives but it is unlikely to be something we could achieve every day. For to achieve such a deep and specific Zange is usually a struggle over a period of time to bring the reality of the fact that one is a slanderer from just a passing thought or theory in our minds, to a reality which fills our whole lives with deep regret, gratitude for having the Gohonzon and determination to work for kosen-rufu as we have never worked before. Once achieved it is as if the bars of a prison in which we have been incarcerated for as long as we can remember, have suddenly fallen away.

Mr Satoro Izumi, vice-president of the Soka Gakkai, who wrote "Guidelines in Faith" and has practiced for forty-five years, once said, as an example, that if you stole a watch twenty years ago, you are bound at some point to feel really sorry for this when you are in front of the Gohonzon and then you express your sincere regret while chanting daimoku. However, this is not necessarily a deep and specific Zange aimed at rooting out the inherent cause for stealing. Such deep Zange is a total realization of the way in which you have hurt that person's life as well as your own, followed by an overwhelming desire to give that person a thousand gold watches if you could only do so.

Dick Causton UKE July 1985