

Nothing Is without Purpose

Rev. Nichiko Niwano
President of Rissho Kosei-kai



Diligence Helps Us Refocus on Becoming Buddhas

The other day someone asked me, “What do I need to do in order to become a buddha? What sort of practice or plan is best?” Since Buddhism is sometimes explained as “teachings in order to become a buddha,” the question does seem to be, “what should we do to attain that goal?”

However, when we delve deeply into chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, “The Life Span of the Eternal Tathagata,” we see that our diligence is not for the sake of becoming buddhas. So, in response to the person who asked this, I said the following:

“Becoming a buddha may be defined as ‘attaining awakening,’ but in that sense, we’re taught that we’re already awakened. Therefore, rather than saying that we’re engaged in a particular practice or plan for becoming buddhas, we should really say that after having awakened, we’re continuing to practice diligence through the way we lead our daily lives.”

The reason we continue to be diligent is because we sometimes forget our essential nature. Making this effort to return to our awakened, true selves is, in itself, living the faith from one day to the next. Life is full of various anxieties and sufferings, but when we believe in our own awakened selves and those of other people (the self of others*) and are diligent together, this world in its present form becomes the Realm of Tranquil Light. Only by encountering such teachings of the Buddha and thereby becoming aware of the preciousness of life can we spend each and every day grateful. Unfortunately, however, we sometimes forget our happy selves and suffer.

As If It Were Your Own

There is a line in “The Life Span of the Eternal Tathagata” that goes like this: “the sutras expounded by the Tathagata are all for the purpose of liberating living beings.” In other words, all the Buddha’s teachings are for the sake of liberating people from the world of delusions.

It may sound difficult to liberate living beings from the world of delusions, but





this simply means that we need to become human beings who are always—and from the heart—happy, joyful, and pleasant. As long as we don't forget our essential nature, we can experience such happiness.

In this regard, the Buddha gives us hints, in different forms or through different things, about how we can remove ourselves from the world of delusions. The scripture tells us that skillful means are innumerable, but it's important to remember that these are not only the teachings of the saints and the wise, but also all the different events that happen in the world—both good and bad. These become hints, causes, or conditions that help us return to our true selves and experience happiness.

Some people may become aware of their true selves through an injury or illness, while others may awaken and call forth their mind of compassion after first becoming able to understand someone else's pain. Furthermore, if you witness another person's happiness and feel so happy yourself—as if it were your own—that you're moved to tears, it's probably because your buddha-nature is manifesting itself.

The Buddha wants all people to be liberated and become happy. By practicing with accepting the sadness and happiness of other people as our own, we come to realize that the Buddha's wish is deeply planted in our own minds.

Global phenomena such as the spread of COVID-19 teach us many things. If we accept such events and learn from them, nothing in this world is without purpose and every single thing helps us return to our awakened true selves—in other words, to buddhas.

As an aside, those who pray for the happiness of people around the world and take it upon themselves to think about people in distant countries are, in a manner of speaking, members of a global sangha who all share the same wish.

The mind of devotion of we who believe in the buddha-nature of ourselves and others—in other words, our religious faith—forms the starting point for spreading true happiness throughout the world.

* “The self of others” (Jpn., *toko*) means “other people and all existence.” This phrase appears in *Shobogenzo (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye)* by Dogen, founder of Zen's Soto school. Dogen taught that when we see ourselves and others as one, everything that exists outside one's self is “the self of others,” which then unites with “one's self.”

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Realizing What's Truly Important



Mrs. Yukiko Lachevre
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This Dharma Journey talk was presented on May 17, 2020 during an online event called "Social Engagement Day in Europe and Africa 2020."

HELLO, everyone. My name is Yukiko Lachevre. I'm a member of Rissho Kosei-kai of Rome.

In the summer of 2018, I emigrated from Japan to France with my family. A year has passed since we moved to our current house. I was only beginning to get used to our new life when a nationwide lockdown was imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It forced me to stay home every day with two energetic sons and a one-year-old daughter while my husband went to work. This lifestyle has lasted for about two months.

I thought that not only people in France but also the whole world feared they might be infected by COVID-19, and that many of them were surely anxious and stressed about the uncertain future. So, I was confused when I sensed that my friends and family in Japan weren't as alarmed by the risk of infection as I was.

Rev. Katsutoshi Mizumo, the director of Rissho Kosei-kai of Rome, advised me to give my best to what I could do now. After the lockdown was imposed, however, I became busier with daily housework and childcare, and it was all I could do to just deal with that. Moreover, quarrels between my husband and my oldest son were increasing every day, which was heartbreaking to see and hear.

Rev. Mizumo advised me to convey my innermost honest feelings to them. I tried to put his words into practice, but it wasn't easy.

One day, I had the opportunity to participate in an online meeting with a Japanese sangha. During the meeting, Rev. Kazuko Furuya, minister of the Shinjuku Dharma Center in Tokyo, gave me some advice. She said, "If you read the posthumous names of your husband's ancestors while you're offering daily sutra recitation, you will receive the Buddha's protection."

When I put her advice into practice, I realized that until that moment, I'd been putting my palms together only in form and reading the *Kyoten* (sutra readings) superficially. I also realized that up until then I had not been thankful for my husband and children from the bottom of my heart, and that I'd only been looking at the negative points of my husband and oldest son.

This realization made me change the way I recited the sutra. I made a point of saying a vow during morning recitations to be grateful for being alive and to be kind to my husband and children, while also expressing appreciation for our ancestors. In the evening, I recited the sutra while reflecting on the day with gratitude.

Through these practices, my way of seeing things has changed, and I gradually became able to put the guidance of Rev. Mizumo into practice. I'm not very good at praising others, but whenever I honestly put my gratitude and joy into words, my husband and oldest son showed me happy faces, which made me happy, too. In the meantime, the quarrels between them gradually decreased.

When I heard someone on TV say, "During the



Mrs. Yukiko Lachevre gives her Dharma Journey talk online.

lockdown, let's cherish this time by spending it with family and relaxing," I thought it was impossible for my family—after all, the atmosphere in my home was getting worse. However, by practicing the guidance of Rev. Mizumo and Rev. Furuya, I realized that the life that seemed like nothing special is in fact truly precious and something to be grateful for. I owe this awareness to Rev. Mizumo and Rev. Furuya, and to my fellow sangha members in Japan who listened to me and gave me advice during the online Dharma circle. I dread to think what could have become of me if I hadn't encountered the teachings of Rissho Kosei-kai.

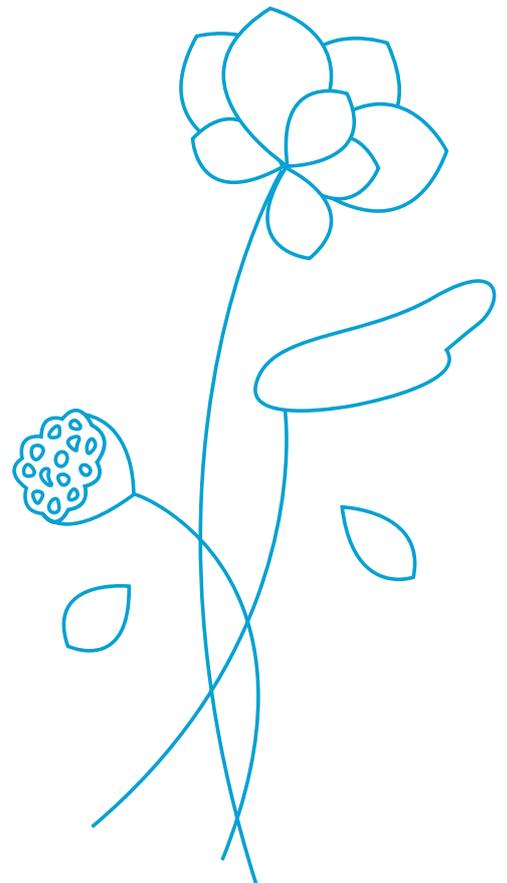
By taking part in the practice of reciting the Three-fold Lotus Sutra during a separate online meeting, I realized that I was firmly connected with the warm-hearted sangha in Japan even though we were physically far apart from each other. I was truly grateful for this, and I wish to continue getting connected with the sangha without limit and without reserve.

My husband says that people in this town are unfriendly. But when the lockdown is lifted and schools start up again, I hope I will be the first to happily greet the mothers of my children's friends and interact with them with a cheerful heart. I pray that such happy days will come as soon as possible.

Everyone, thank you for listening.



Mrs. Lachevre recites the sutra in front of her home altar.



The Threefold Lotus Sutra: A Summary and Key Points for Each Chapter

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wondrous Dharma Chapter 17

Specification of Merits (1)

The previous chapter set forth the principle that the ultimate substance of the Buddha is the Eternal Original Buddha, which sustains all things in the universe and is an everlasting presence abounding within and around us all. The present chapter discusses the merits of knowing this truth and divides it into twelve parts, or stages, in order to demonstrate how to live in right faith.

The Great Merit of Knowing the Meaning of Life

Without going into the twelve stages in detail, let it be enough to say that the meaning is this: if we grasp the essence of faith (that our life is sustained by an Eternal Original Buddha that has infinite life), our ability to deepen our faith and extend it to others is without limit. Then, if that faith is thoroughgoing, we are granted the supreme merit of attaining the same ultimate awakening as the Buddha.

Clearly, no ordinary practice is going to lead to such an attainment of buddhahood. As told in this chapter, some bodhisattvas practiced throughout eight lifetimes before attaining this state. But simply to know that by right faith and true endeavor we will, at some point, reach the same state as Shakyamuni is a vast source of light to ourselves and to all humanity. With this light, every human life takes on meaning and is joyous.

People earn or lose money; they fall in and out of love. They may lose a long-sought-after job because of a trifling mistake. If we pass through life in this way, merely repeating these moments of joy and sorrow in vain no matter how important each moment might seem, we'll realize on our deathbeds that our life has been swayed by a narrow egoism that chased after shadows. We will almost certainly experience an ineffable sense of emptiness when we look back on our lives.

How totally different, though, is a life in which there is a firm backbone of faith—even if on the surface it seems no different from a vain life of recurring pains, sorrows, and joys. For with this backbone, if we are convinced that we can continually progress toward the state of the Buddha, whatever the ups and downs, even the most painful life can be lived pleasantly and ended happily.

Our lives do not stop with this life. If we could foresee the repetition of the various events of our daily lives—nothing but recurrent joys and sorrows in each and every life to come, and our future transmigration into the worlds of unfortunate states of existence such as purgatory and animals far from human beings—we would become discouraged simply by the thought of such a bleak prospect. But with true faith and the awareness that every step brings us that much closer to the state of the Buddha, the journey, no matter how long, is always full of interest, hope, and fulfillment. This indeed is the great merit won by the true believer.

Yet, the efforts of true believers do not end with





themselves alone, for while their efforts are toward the state of the Buddha, they also strive to bring everyone they can into the Way. The more that people of true faith increase in number, the more all humanity is elevated and this world approaches the ideal of the Land of Eternal Tranquil Light. Taken together, all the merits explained in this chapter can be boiled down to this.

The Merits Explained in the Concluding Part of the Sutra

The concluding part of the Lotus Sutra runs from the last half of chapter 17 through chapter 28, the end of the sutra. The main themes of this part are the merits of right faith, the state of mind necessary for right faith, and Shakyamuni's commission to all his disciples, including us, to teach the right faith to later generations.

The present chapter, "Specification of Merits," explains the merits of the spirit, and this continues into the first half of the next chapter, "The Merits of Rejoicing." The last half of "The Merits of Rejoicing" begins to discuss the merits that manifest in our personal affairs and daily lives.

Some people are of the opinion that we don't need to pay attention to the merits taught in the concluding part of the sutra. They think that as long as we thoroughly study the "one chapter and two halves" (chapter 16, "The Life Span of the Eternal Tathagata," and the two halves of the chapters immediately before and after it), truly understand its teachings, and have deep faith in the infinite life span of the Buddha and the fact that we are one with the Original Buddha, we can disregard the rest. Certainly anyone who can do just this is commendable. But complete faith is difficult to attain—some believe that only one person in ten thousand, or even one in a hundred thousand, can achieve it.

This ideal state seems so far removed from the reality of ordinary people that it sounds altogether alien to them when they first learn about it. But, as one might expect, if this ideal is explained from the standpoint of the familiar problems in people's daily lives, they can get a vivid sense of the teachings. Herein lies the primary significance of the concluding part of the Lotus Sutra.

Ordinary people also tend to slack off. Even when they are fully aware of the value of the teaching, they may soon become apathetic about their practice if they only have an intellectual understanding of its virtue. However, if people continually read and recite the sutra, which teaches that they can actually improve themselves by having right faith and putting it into practice, then their faith will constantly be renewed and never give way to the tendency to become disinterested. This is the second purpose of the concluding part of the sutra.

Finally, Shakyamuni specifically entrusted even people like ourselves with the dissemination of his teaching. This is something to be grateful for: every time we look upon his words and see into his thoughts, we are lifted up and imbued with an indescribable courage. This is the third purpose of the sutra's concluding part.

And so, for the overwhelming majority of us who are simply ordinary people, the concluding part of the Lotus Sutra is indispensable. Therefore, we must study it with the same fervor and humility as the main part.

To be continued

This is an English translation of text that originally appeared in Japanese in *Hokke sanbu kyo: Kaku hon no aramashi to yoten*, by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai (Kosei Publishing, 1991 [revised edition, 2016]), pp. 170–76.



Learning from Everything

STAYING home has become a way of life for many of us after the spread of COVID-19. I hope everyone is safe and doing well.

In his message for this month, President Nichiko Niwano explains the mindset that nothing in this world is without purpose, including such phenomena as the pandemic. He points out that being diligent in our everyday lives is not a practice for becoming buddhas, but for returning to our awakened “true selves.”

He says that although our lives are filled with anxiety and suffering, all events that may happen—both good and bad—are the hints, causes, or conditions that help us return to our essential nature.

This month, I hope each one of us will continue our efforts to find happiness, joy, and pleasure in everyday life with a mind of accepting and learning from everything that comes our way.

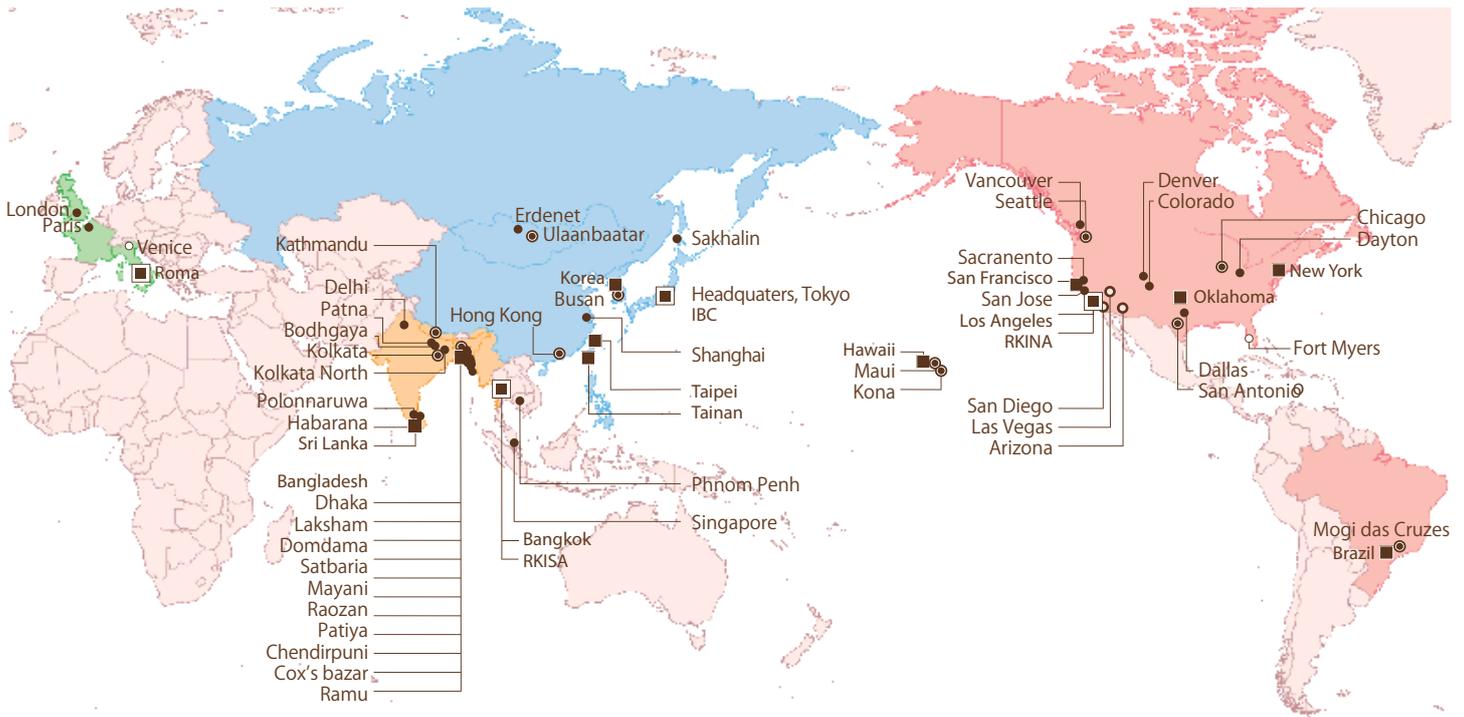
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