

Living the

LOTUS

Buddhism in Everyday Life

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FOUNDER'S ESSAY

The Longing of Young People

YOUNG people are forward looking in era, always striving to live better lives. When you deeply believe this, your view of young people changes completely, and you no longer say things like “today’s young people are helpless,” or “they have no willpower.” We must have a higher regard for the young, recognizing that if the young (who should be brimming with dynamism) are helpless, the fault must lay with society.

For example, the child who refuses to attend school actually has a stronger desire to go to school than any other child. Young people in particular who have sunk into helplessness are really crying out for some response from life. However, they are convinced that

their schools and their parents won’t accept them as they are. They have been laden with selfish adult value judgments to the effect that if they don’t get good grades at school and join a company that pays a high salary, they will never be happy. It’s impossible to know how many children there are who cannot fit themselves into this framework, and have gotten the idea into their heads that they are failures.

Young people’s lives are transformed when they meet someone who will teach them their true worth as human beings, and will be straight with them.

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Rissho Kosei-kai is a lay Buddhist organization whose holy scripture is the Threefold Lotus Sutra. It was established by Founder Nikkyo Niwano and Cofounder Myoko Naganuma in 1938. This organization is composed of ordinary men and women who have faith in the Buddha and strive to enrich their spirituality by applying his teachings to their daily lives. At both the local community and international levels, we, under the guidance of President Nichiko Niwano, are very active in promoting peace and well-being through altruistic activities and cooperation with other organizations.

The title, *Living the Lotus—Buddhism in Everyday Life*, is meant to convey our hope of striving to practice the teachings of the Lotus Sutra in daily life, to enrich and make our lives more worthwhile, like lotus flowers blooming in a muddy pond. The online edition aims to make Buddhism more practicable in the daily lives of people around the world.



GUIDANCE BY PRESIDENT NIWANO

Start with Yourself

by Nichiko Niwano
President of Rissho Kosei-kai

With Natural Enjoyment

From time to time, I see in my neighborhood volunteer youth groups picking up roadside litter. That is truly a refreshing sight. However, there are so many cigarette butts, empty drink cans, and discarded paper trash that, no matter how much they pick up, the litter seems endless. It makes me wonder if those who do the littering have any sense of public morality.

If we criticize the litterers, however, our irritation and anger only increase, and our minds become filled with displeasure. Surely we need not allow other people's litter to defile our minds.

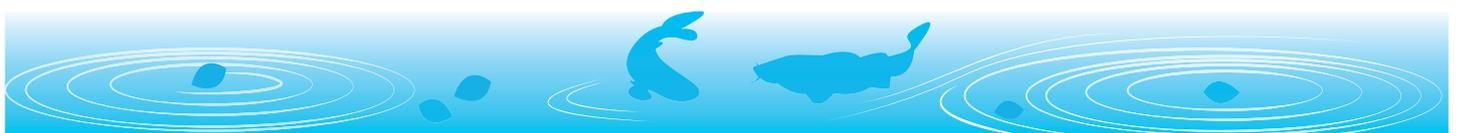
When I went out for a walk with my wife not long ago, we also picked up litter along the roadside. This made me realize once again the obvious fact that if people didn't litter, others wouldn't be troubled by the need to pick up after them. Thanks to that experience, the thought "I will never litter" was emblazoned on my mind. At the same time, I also felt that if other people's roadside litter bothered me, it taught me that, before I criticize others, I should start with myself and take some positive steps.

You should start with yourself whenever you notice something that needs your help. This is not limited to picking up litter, but is one of the guidelines for leading a lifestyle that satisfies one.

What matters most in doing so is that your actions reflect the natural functioning of your mind and that you enjoy yourself while undertaking the practice. As is written in an ancient Indian text, "A bodhisattva who provides benefits to others gives rise to no pride or arrogance, because for a bodhisattva, doing so is a pleasure."

We are all bodhisattvas, receiving life from the Buddha. Therefore, being self-conscious about our actions or feeling dissatisfied at being forced to do them will not make them a pleasure.

Just as nature pours forth its blessings unconditionally, we should naturally lend a hand to those in need, and take the lead in cleaning up a dirty place. Doing so can be a pleasure, and frees us from other feelings and concerns. This mental state, akin to the Buddha's unhindered meditation, means that we are putting into practice the guideline of starting with ourselves.



From the Compassionate Mind of All

This past spring, massive earthquakes struck the area of Japan centering on Kumamoto Prefecture. It pains me to realize that there are still many local residents there whose lives remain very difficult. I have heard that many Rissho Kosei-kai members in the area have been concerned about the situation of their fellow sangha members since the earthquakes struck and made every effort to help them even though they themselves were victims of the disaster and were facing their own difficulties. Without being asked, they did such things as distributing vital necessities, lending an ear to the survivors' experiences, sympathizing with them, and giving them encouragement. One member put it this way, "I myself don't know why I kept up my efforts and seemed to forget whether I had eaten or slept." Just as in the phrase, "the Buddha shows compassion without thinking of compassion," surely the members were mentally inspired to act, and therefore could not stop from seeking to assist. Taking direct action thus did not seem hard or stressful to them. Rather, one realizes that they gladly accepted the opportunity as a karmic connection, and kept themselves busy doing as much as possible.

Of course, bodhisattvas like them are not exclusively Rissho Kosei-kai sangha members. When I hear about everyone who, whether taking the lead by starting with themselves or making every effort to put others first, did just as their hearts told them, freed themselves from attachments, and raced around joyfully helping others, I think that they are teaching me just how great our peace of mind will be when consideration for others is put into practice by each and every one of us.

The kanji character *kyo* of the word *kyoryoku* (cooperation) means harmonizing by joining power. By being considerate to your family members, by thinking of the people around you and turning your attention to starting with yourself, and by joining your power with that of others, you can begin to enter a world of peace in which everyone can live together with a feeling of satisfaction.

The mention of peace should remind us that the practice that achieves it does not consist solely of positive actions for its sake, but also requires our continual open-mindedness toward all people, including those we feel deserve harsh criticism. Such changes in our consciousness are also, for each of us, extremely important practices.

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Spiritual Journey

How the Encounter with the Dharma Changed My Life

by Ms. Mary Sigman
New York Dharma Center

This Dharma experience speech was delivered at the Great Sacred Hall in Tokyo during the World Sangha Assembly 2016 on May 29, 2016.

I am the leader of the Fort Myers Group in Florida, which is part of the New York Dharma Center. My life partner, Jerry, totally supports me. My heart is full of gratitude.

I was born in March, 1948. Since I was adopted by my parents immediately after birth from a Catholic orphanage, I don't know the details about my birth. Later on, my parents adopted a boy, so I had my younger brother.

We were raised in the Catholic faith, and our parents always told us, "You were specially chosen to be our children." We grew up feeling confident we were loved.

However, when I was ten years old, I realized that my mother was an alcoholic.

Alcohol made my mother into a very different person. When friends came to play at our home, she would laugh for no reason and act irrationally. At first I was embarrassed, but eventually I started to feel afraid. She began to be physically abusive to my father and brother. She hurt me with her verbal abuse.

Later on, my mother died from alcohol abuse at the age of sixty-five.

A few years later, my brother and then my father died due to illness. In my heart there was a huge hole of emptiness.

At the time I was living in the suburbs of Chicago, and taught kindergarten in Chicago public schools for thirty-four years. During almost twenty years of my teaching career, I drove by the Chicago chapter every day, but did not know it existed.

One particular day, while stopped at a red light, I saw their sign and became aware it was a Buddhist Center.

Being a yoga teacher as well, I was interested in Buddhism so I visited the center. The chapter leader, Mrs. Kayo Murakami, and the members warmly welcomed me. Every time I visited, I enjoyed the solemn and calming ritual.

I felt my heart being purified in the sutra recitation. My favorite verse in the book of sutra excerpts we use daily, the *Kyoten*, is "To ever dwell in the city of nirvana, / And to be peaceful with a clear heart, / You must recite the Great Vehicle sutras / And bring the mother of bodhisattvas to mind."

At the time, I didn't understand these words, but "the

mental state of nirvana," "peaceful mind," "to recite the Great Vehicle sutras," and "to acquire compassionate heart" were concepts that naturally resonated in my heart.

Furthermore, our chapter leader taught me the importance of ancestor veneration. The concept of ancestor veneration was very new to me, but I was drawn to it. This led me to request a memorial service to be performed for my mother who raised me.

Thereafter, a service for my mother was held. I began to realize the mystery of my existence here and now. I now chanted my morning and evening recitation with a deeper feeling.

I became aware that I wanted to cleanse my heart, which could not respect my mother because she had hurt me for so long. And I thought, "She always did the best she could." My attitude towards my mother drastically changed.

Since then, I retired from my job and moved to Fort Myers, Florida. My spiritual journey continues.

There was no member in Fort Myers when I started, so I tried to guide one by one. The membership grew gradually and we now have twenty-one members. Every Sunday we have *hoza*, or Dharma circle, and study session. Our Sangha members respect each other, and we are like a family.

In the past, if someone was sharing their suffering in *hoza*, the other members, with their loving desire to support, would offer advice through their own knowledge



Ms. Mary Sigman delivers her Dharma experience speech at the Great Sacred Hall in Tokyo during the World Sangha Assembly 2016.

and experience, rather than share the teachings of Buddhism.

Two years ago, a leadership training at the New York Dharma Center was held. One of the sessions was on *hoza* leaders' training.

For me, it was the first time to receive training on how to be a *hoza* leader. *Hoza* is the lifeblood of Rissho Kosei-kai. It is where people are actually liberated from their sufferings. It is where people become awakened to the Truth, learn from one another how to practice as bodhisattvas. It is the Buddha that actually liberates the people, but I learned it is important as *hoza* leader to listen deeply and become one with the person who is suffering.

I do my best to listen to their story without judgment, try to understand the person better, and deepen our connection.

I was able to comprehend that when someone who is suffering is able to completely share his story, he will come to the realization that the cause of the suffering lies within himself, and that it is he who can liberate himself from that suffering.

What was taught in the *hoza* leaders' training was also applicable to the Fort Myers members who, as typical Americans, like to immediately give advice to others. Our *hoza* sessions changed. It became a place to learn from one another.

Ms. A has a son who suffers from mental illness, and has struggled for a very long time. One day, during *hoza*, she spoke at length about her suffering. This was not the first time I heard what she is going through, but this time, I just listened deeply to her pain. At the end of her story, she looked very tired and announced, "I will not be coming here for a while."

When she said that she is at the point of not believing in religion any more, I felt her anguish and it touched my heart.

With my belief in her and in the Buddha, I said, "Ms. A, we will be very sorry not to see you, but will always be thinking of you. Whenever you want to see us, please come here." In my heart, however, I was feeling a bit sad.

To my surprise, on the next day, I received a wonderful e-mail saying, "I changed my mind. I love everyone in the Sangha. I will still come on Sundays."

She had taken one step toward liberation. Through deep attentive listening, I started to see Ms. A's buddha-nature that wished to be liberated from suffering.

Not long after this incident, Rev. Etsuko Fujita, minister of the New York Dharma Center, came to Fort Myers on a dissemination trip. She spoke warmly to Ms. A and

said, "As we live, there are happy times and times we have to face hardships and problems. Everything in life is a vehicle to help us attain buddhahood. I would like to hear more so I can understand you better."

Then, Ms. A started to talk about her own life. She spoke frankly of the tremendous struggles she had in dealing with her son's mental illness.

And she started to share details that we had never heard before.

She said, "Before my encounter with Rissho Kosei-kai, I was critical of others looking down on them. But the teaching of Rissho Kosei-kai is different. It is not about judging people or changing people. My son's illness gave me an opportunity to raise my awareness. He taught me to see people as they are. He planted seeds of kindness and compassion in my heart, as I tried to respect others and understand their point of view."

And Ms. A continues her story.

"Then, I started to see my husband's tremendous value. To this day, my husband never abandoned our son and continues to believe in him. As the father, he gives his utmost to protect the family. He is very strong and truly reliable."

I was so amazed and moved by Ms. A's remarkable acceptance of the way things are. I could feel the candle in her heart had already been lit by the Dharma. How wonderful! I wept with joy because we are family. I felt that we are one; that we are both sustained by the same life force.

Because I encountered Rissho Kosei-kai and the teachings of Buddhism, I was able to realize that my birth parents (who gave me life on this earth) and my adoptive parents (who valued that life and raised me) all lived and were sustained by the same life force of the Buddha. At present, I am deeply moved and full of gratitude.

Everyone, thank you very much.



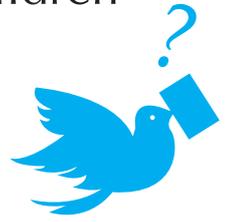
Ms. Mary Sigman, third from right, and members of the Fort Myers Group celebrate Shakyamuni Buddha's birthday.

Child Care *lifeline*

I'm Concerned about My Son, Who Hits Other Children



My nearly two-year-old son hits other children for absolutely no reason, and I don't know what to do. When I take my son to the park, I have to apologize to other mothers so often that I get really tired. I think my son probably has some reason for doing this, but I have no idea what it is. I'm currently four months pregnant and my mind is too occupied. The other day, I was so at a loss as to what to do that I spanked my son. Did the spanking cause an emotional wound for my son?



I think you are a really good mother, because you are able to reflect on yourself through the actions of your son. It is the love you have for your son that allows you to reflect on the spanking. Since you are such a reflective mother, I'm sure you will be able to overcome the difficulties of parenting and then feel great joy of attainment.

When children start doing things that they haven't done before, it's a sign that they are trying to convey a message. The act of hitting other children seems to be something bad on the surface, but it's important to pay attention to the message hidden behind the act.

In your case, there are three different possibilities that I can think of. First, children grow looking at the words and actions of their mothers every day (education through influence). Children don't always listen to their parents. Parents want to make the children behave as they think they should, then get emotional, and spank them unintentionally. Children grow, imitating the way their mothers usually act. So when children can't do as they wish, I think they will hit other children unintentionally.

Another possibility is that children don't know how to express their feelings to be friends with other children and hit them. In that case, it would be great if you could find an opportunity for your son to become friends with other children. If your son hits another child, please apologize to the other child on behalf of your son, and tell your son that it's not good to hit others. Show your son how he should act.

Lastly, another possibility is that your son is sensitive to the presence of the baby that you are carrying, and is going through the so-called "infantile regression."

In any of these cases, it is most important for your son to feel your affection towards him. If he is able to apologize to the children for hitting them, you should respond by giving him a tight hug. Placing him on your lap, say to your son, "There's a baby in my tummy" or "The baby in my tummy wants to play with you as soon as possible!" That kind of caring, physical contact will stabilize your son mentally and gradually lead him to refrain from hitting others.

Point Motherly Warmth

Most of the problems of childhood show the signs of a child's unsatisfied desires for his or her mother's attention. Don't overlook those signs, and show your affection to your son.



(Answers provided by the Tokyo Research Institute for Family Education)

The Tokyo Research Institute for Family Education cooperates with us in producing this regular column. The institute believes that if parents change their thinking and behavior for the better, so will their children. The institute offers lectures and seminars for parents in various areas of Japan and in other countries, as well as giving personal advice to parents on childrearing. For decades, the institute's programs have helped parents with childrearing problems grow spiritually with their children to create harmonious, happy homes.

Planting a Good Seed in Your Mind and Heart

You are really concerned about your son, and you manage to find room in your heart for him, despite having so much going on in your own life. I think you're a wonderful mother.

Even though we human beings may intellectually understand that “this is right” or “that shouldn’t happen,” we still are easily influenced by our own emotions, rather than our reason. So, what is the source of those emotions?

The source is the subconscious, which we can neither be aware of nor control by ourselves. The subconscious becomes the source of our emotions, and as such, gives rise to our actions.

Therefore, Buddhism teaches us that it’s important to purify our own subconscious. So how can we purify it? In order to do so, we have to accumulate good deeds (merits) without committing any evil in our everyday lives.

When we try to get rid of our self-centered mind through practicing good, we will be able to become the kind of people who will not be influenced by our emotions. Let’s strive to plant a good seed in our hearts and minds through actively practicing even a single good deed, rather than regretting what we couldn’t do. Such positive behavior from a mother will foster your child’s heart and mind.

Please begin by greeting your family members wholeheartedly and with a big smile.

(Editorial Supervision by Department of Dharma Education & Human Resources Development, Rissho Kosei-kai)



Please give us your comments!



We welcome comments on our e-newsletter *Living the Lotus*.

Please send us your comments to the following e-mail address.

E-mail: living.the.lotus.rk-international@kosei-kai.or.jp



Director's Column

Let Our Smiles Shine to Make the World Happy

I serve as head of the night-time service team at the Great Sacred Hall several times a year. I lead the sutra recitation at 6 p.m. at the hall, and sleep in a room located there. I get up before 5 a.m., when the people of the service team for the day also gather. All are volunteers from Tokyo-area Dharma centers. In order to come to the Great Sacred Hall, they must leave their homes quite early. It is amazing that they all keep their smiles. They look very happy. The beauty of their smiles makes me remember the wonderful smiles of all Rissho Kosei-kai members in the world.

“Each one of our lives contains the spiritual DNA of the Founder.” What came to my mind were these words of Rev. Kosho Niwano at the World Sangha Assembly 2016. I remember that Founder Niwano was always smiling. What I learned from the Founder is that by keeping a smile, one naturally becomes happy, and that by living with smiles one can make the world happy. So let us turn on the Founder’s spiritual DNA, and bring happiness to the world.

REV. SHOKO MIZUTANI
Director of Rissho Kosei-kai International



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