

Living the LOTUS

Buddhism in Everyday Life



🌸 Founder's Essay 🌸

The Importance of a Role Model

PEOPLE often ask me, “Founder Niwano, no matter what kind of person you meet, you always seem able to find their good points, and whatever circumstances you encounter you always take things positively. Is there some sort of secret to this?”

I don’t know if I would call it a secret, but I imagine how the Buddha would respond to that person, or what the Buddha would think about that situation. Then I work at following his example.

Children become adults by imitating their parents. Disciples become accomplished by patterning themselves after their mentors. If you also have a person you admire

and wish you were like, follow their example perfectly and one day you will indeed become just like them.

Looking at the people you meet and the situations you encounter in light of the Lotus Sutra, practicing as the sutra shows you means reading and reciting the sutra and putting what you learn into action. We cannot see the Buddha, who passed away some 2,500 years ago, with our naked eyes, but if we practice as indicated by the sutra we will be able to see the Buddha right in front of us.

Nikkyo Niwano, *Kaiso zuikan* 9 (Kosei Publishing, 1997), pp. 14–15

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Rissho Kosei-kai is a global Buddhist movement of people who strive to apply the teachings of the Threefold Lotus Sutra, one of the foremost Buddhist scriptures, in their daily lives and contribute to world peace. It was founded in 1938 by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (1906–1999) and Rev. Myoko Naganuma (1889–1957). With the guidance of President Nichiko Niwano, Rissho Kosei-kai members actively share the Dharma widely and engage in peace activities both locally and internationally in cooperation with people from many walks of life.

The title of this newsletter, *Living the Lotus—Buddhism in Everyday Life*, conveys our hope of striving to practice the teachings of the Lotus Sutra in daily life in an imperfect world to enrich and make our lives more worthwhile, like beautiful lotus flowers blooming in a muddy pond. This newsletter aims to help people around the world apply Buddhism more easily in their daily lives.



President's Message

Transcending a Biased View

Rev. Nichiko Niwano
President of Rissho Kosei-kai



The Bias of Thinking "I Am Right"

Most of the time, we don't believe that our thoughts and actions are wrong. Even if someone points out that we're expressing a one-sided view, we don't think we're looking at things in a prejudiced or biased manner.

On the other hand, just as we humbly believe the words of someone who is always kind to us, we reject the opinions of a critical person, don't we? We tend to place importance on our own emotions and circumstances when it comes to how we see and perceive things. It goes without saying that this is a narrow, self-centered viewpoint. If we allow this viewpoint to intensify, attachments and biases like "my idea is right" and "my judgment isn't wrong" become stronger, while our ability to see things correctly becomes weaker.

So, while we're reflecting upon such viewpoints, let me introduce a passage from the Lotus Sutra that will motivate us to broaden our perspective. In chapter 12, "Devadatta," we find these words: "I attained Perfect Awakening and extensively liberated living beings. All of this is due to the good friendship of Devadatta."

In this key passage, Shakyamuni expresses to the Sangha his gratitude to Devadatta, who had been so hostile toward Shakyamuni that he had even tried to kill him. I interpret this passage as playing the role of a switch that can change our minds and turn our viewpoint completely away from our own biases and toward a broader perspective.



Single-Mindedly Believing in Buddha-Nature

It is said that when the horizon at the bottom of the deep darkness began to turn white and the morning star sparkled upon him, Shakyamuni attained enlightenment. At that moment, Shakyamuni's mind must have reached the middle sky, become one with the universe, and grasped great Truth.

Perhaps he saw things from a cosmic perspective; perhaps the sparkling light of the morning star was mirrored in the light shining forth from his own and other people's buddha-nature. Either way, in that instant, Shakyamuni's eyes must have seen the reality of the world just as it is—in other words, the buddha-nature embodied in everything that sparkled and shined beautifully.

In addition, I think that even as Shakyamuni was being directly confronted with the harsh reality of the accusations and attacks from Devadatta, he also raised his heart to the middle sky and faced him with a broad, great mind. In that moment, the self-centered mind of seeing Devadatta as “a bad person who tried to hurt me” switched to the great mind that believes in buddha-nature and can only put hands together reverently and pay homage to all. Therefore, how could Devadatta, who prompted that change of mind, be anything other than a “good friend” to Shakyamuni?

If you take the perspective that all things embody buddha-nature, you will not hurt or argue with people based on a biased point of view. Before you criticize others, if you have the chance to recall that, “Oh, they, too, are none other than buddha-nature,” you will not have to worry about having a biased point of view.

However, believing in buddha-nature does not mean seeing only the good in others. It means revering other people in their *entirety* as buddha-nature itself. I think that while we single-mindedly believe in the buddha-nature of all people, we continue to evolve by confronting contradictions and difficult problems.

As the Buddhist thinker Shuichi Maida (1906–67) said about “believing”: “In this world, some people are suspicious of others / and find fault with them, / saying that those people do not believe them. [...] By believing other people / other people will believe in you— / And this is called the great way of belief.”

There is no going back to our childhoods, when we didn't have so many unnecessary preconceptions. At the very least, however, on the day of the festival celebrating the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha—when we pay homage to the statue of the newborn Shakyamuni enshrined in our Dharma centers for the occasion—it is important that we regain our innocent, unblemished hearts and deeply reflect upon the buddha-nature of ourselves and others.

From *Kosei*, April 2020





Realizing the Worth of Being Alive



Mr. Noritaka Minami
Rissho Kosei-kai of Los Angeles

*This Dharma Journey talk was presented on March 5, 2020,
during Gakurin Seminary's commencement ceremony.*

HELLO everyone. I am a thirty-two-year-old Japanese American from Los Angeles, and a third-generation member of Rissho Kosei-kai. My family consists of my parents, my younger sister, and our dog. Rev. Nick Ozuna, who currently serves as associate minister of the Seattle Dharma Center, was instrumental in my entrance into Gakurin Seminary. My life has changed since I started studying here.

I was born and raised in Los Angeles. As I grew up, I began to struggle with the gap between American and Japanese cultures, and especially with the differences between the two languages, which prevented me from fully expressing myself to my parents. At school, my classmates treated me as Japanese, but I couldn't answer their questions when they asked me about Japan. At home, I talked and acted like an American in the eyes of my parents. They didn't seem to understand me.

I had so many questions for my parents. Why was I born in America, and not in Japan? Why had my parents come to America in the first place, especially considering the fact that they didn't speak English well? Why was it so hard to communicate with my family?

By my early twenties, I wasn't coping well with the differences in cultures and customs between the two countries. I talked about it with my parents and friends, but they just didn't get it, which made me feel isolated and alone. More than anything else, I wanted to convey my feelings to my parents, but I failed each time and eventually gave up. As time went on, we talked to each other less and less. When I did occasionally try to have a conversation with them, it never worked out. My mother would say to me, "Nori, you can decide what you want to do in life from now on." I wanted to live up to my parents' expectations, but I

lacked confidence. I thought to myself, "What can I possibly do at all?"

Eventually, every time my mother said something to me, it felt like she was criticizing me. I came to hate my mother and myself as well. I couldn't find a goal in life. If I could satisfy my immediate desires, the rest didn't matter to me. I didn't think about the preciousness of my own life. For a while I envisioned myself becoming a professional video game player, and then I considered joining the military. Nothing in my daily life ever went right, and I was edgy all the time.

To make my life even more complicated, my sister, who is two years younger than me, is unable to communicate well due to autism. Even as I worried about her future, I found myself not wanting to take care of her for the rest of my life. I wanted to be set free from that burden as well as the loneliness that came from not having any friends who understood what it's like to have a sister who is challenged. Trying to escape from reality, I often indulged in whatever fun came my way. My inability to be interested in my job made me even more disgusted with my life. I didn't see any



Mr. Minami delivers his Dharma Journey talk during the commencement.

me even more disgusted with my life. I didn't see any point of living.

One night, I felt I'd be better off dead and, in desperation, resigned myself to dying. I drove down a freeway as fast as I could and closed my eyes for a time, hoping for the end. But the moment I opened my eyes, I realized I was still alive. I was overwhelmed with both joy and sadness as a flood of emotions hit me. In that instant, the realization struck me—so strongly that I can't even put it into words—that I had been given the gift of life. “Why was I saved? Why am I still alive? If there is a meaning in my life, I want to know,” I thought. I frantically drove back home, crying.

When I was accepted by the Gakurin overseas students course and came to Japan, I felt a sense of liberation: I would no longer have to deal with my family problems or humdrum job. Now I could start all over again, and I would finally be free.

While rejoicing in my newly found freedom during my second year at Gakurin, I was assigned to the Hachinohe Dharma Center in Aomori Prefecture for my Dharma dissemination training under the guidance of Rev. Kotaro Suzuki, minister of the Dharma center and ardent follower of the Dharma.

One day, I accompanied a chapter leader on a visit to Ms. A's home to perform sutra recitation in front of her home altar for the first anniversary of her son's death. He died in a fire at age twenty-three. I had a mystical experience there. Even though it was very hot that day, a sudden chill came over me. When I saw the tears that kept rolling down from Ms. A's eyes throughout the *hoza*, it made me look back on myself and caused me to regret making light of my own life. I realized that if I had committed suicide, my parents would have been tormented by it forever, which brought me to tears. Simultaneously, I was

filled with a sense of gratitude for my parents and ancestors, along with the joy of being alive.

That same year, I became able to embrace the way my sister is, including her autism, after I had the chance to meet a young boy, B-kun, who was visually impaired and also had a brain disorder. Witnessing how his family cherished him as a member of the family, I perceived tenderness that was absent in my family. I felt that if I could relate to my sister with the same tenderness as theirs, my relationship with my family would have to improve as well. From my encounter with B-kun, I learned the importance of accepting people just as they are, without regard to whether they have disabilities or not.

I had two main realizations during my Dharma dissemination training. One is the preciousness of life; the other is how important my sister is to me.

When I received a call from my mother last New Year's Eve, I was able to express my anguish—how I had been hurting all these years because no one in the family understood me. For the first time in my life, I had a heart-to-heart conversation with her, and I discovered that she and I shared many similarities. I had always thought of her as strong, but she told me that she couldn't face the fact that her own precious daughter had autism, and that she became so desperate that it made her consider suicide. Not only did I learn about her pain as I was listening to her, but I was also able to communicate my thoughts to her in Japanese. For the first time, I really felt that I was indeed her son. What made me happiest of all was when she told me, “Nori, thank you for staying alive.” Tears of joy welled up in my eyes.

As I progressed in the study of the Lotus Sutra, my understanding of its teachings deepened, not only in Japanese but also in English. As a result, my once desperate life became one of happiness. Just like the

Spiritual Journey

teaching tells us, “If we change, so will the people around us,” when I changed myself, my mother changed with me. She and I have grown together through the Lotus Sutra. It has given us both courage and hope. Before I came to Gakurin, I could accept neither my family nor myself. I thought I would be better off dead and even contemplated suicide. But now I feel I am worthy of life, and of meeting someone special to start my own family and find happiness with.

President Niwano taught us in his New Year’s message the importance of the spirit of “this place is indeed the place of the Way.” That is, “Wherever you happen to be, wherever you live, wherever you are—all these are ‘places of the Way.’” I’m going to go back to Los Angeles, where my family lives, after graduation. My new practice of the Way will start there. Putting into practice what I have learned at Gakurin, I hope I can do my part to create a sangha that welcomes and is open to everyone, without distinction. In order for that to happen, I will make

revering the buddha-nature of each and every person the first step of my practice. I yearn to diligently practice the Way to help as many people as possible become liberated from their sufferings and worries.

Today I am honored to stand here to present a Dharma Journey talk and represent the four students of Gakurin’s twenty-sixth overseas students course. Rajitha from Sri Lanka, Kanan and Sattayajit from Bangladesh, thank you for your friendship and support over the last two years. Let’s continue to work together to spread the teachings to achieve world peace.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the president, deputy director, instructors, and staff members of Gakurin Seminary, as well as the Japanese seminary students and junior students in the overseas students course, and to my father, my mother and, finally, my sister Iku.

Thank you very much for listening.



Mr. Minami (in the middle) with other students at the Gakurin overseas students course.

Living the
 **LOTUS**

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

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wondrous Dharma

Chapter 14, Peaceful and Agreeable Practices



In the preceding chapter, the bodhisattvas and others in the assembly declared their determination to stand firm in the face of all obstacles and harm. The present chapter deals with the Buddha's advice on how to practice and disseminate the Lotus Sutra, namely the importance of acting of one's own volition with a mind that is always at peace in preaching the Dharma.

For this purpose, the Buddha offers specific instructions on the state of mind to be achieved. Then he gives assurance that belief in and practice of the Lotus Sutra will enable everyone to overcome all hardships and attain peace of mind. He also gives assurance that, since our physical and mental states are not separate, this peace of mind pervades the body and manifests in all aspects of one's life.

The Four Peaceful and Agreeable Practices

At the start of this chapter, Bodhisattva Manjushri says to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, how will we be able to expound this teaching in the evil age to come?" The Buddha answers Manjushri's question by explaining that bodhisattvas should steadfastly abide by four policies known as the Four Peaceful and Agreeable Practices.

The first of these is *physical* peaceful and agreeable practice. It consists of the fundamental attitude that determines personal behavior and relations with others.

The second is *verbal* peaceful and agreeable practice. It warns bodhisattvas against using evil speech.

The third is *mental* peaceful and agreeable practice. It instructs bodhisattvas to always expound the Dharma with a peaceful mind free from envy and deceit.

The fourth is the *vow* of peaceful and agreeable practice. It guides bodhisattvas to keep their vow to lead all people to the Buddha Way and practice devotedly to accomplish this.

The Parable of the Jewel in the Topknot

This chapter features the sixth of the seven parables in the Lotus Sutra: the parable of the jewel in the topknot.

In this parable, there is an incredibly powerful king who has successively conquered all the monarchs of the petty kingdoms that refused to submit to his rule. The king rewards the generals who took part in these battles with land, property, horses, and other various treasures, but he does not give away one thing: the crown jewel in his topknot, a single bright pearl. This one jewel is so precious that he cannot give it away too soon, lest the recipients and his followers be astonished and confused.

The king's reluctance to grant the crown jewel to any of his generals mirrors the Buddha's withholding of the Lotus Sutra from his wise sages. The Buddha rewards the sages with stability of mind, emancipation from human suffering, and the eradication of delusive





passions, but he does not present the teachings of the Lotus Sutra right away because sharing this teaching prematurely would have only confused them.

However, just as the king eventually gives the jewel in his topknot to his victorious soldiers, so the Buddha, once his followers reach a high level of attainment, gives them the ultimate reward of the highest teaching: the Lotus Sutra.

The Spirit Is Intangible, but Most Important

A superficial reading of this parable shows its praise of the Lotus Sutra as the highest teaching, together with the fact that presenting the world with such a teaching is a rare occurrence. But this parable also represents other lessons in life.

First, we may note that the king has numerous other valuable jewels and possessions to give away, but they pertain to his body, while the single bright pearl alone pertains to his head. The head holds the spirit or mind that directs the body. People can use their bodies at will, but harnessing the spirit is most important, although difficult because the spirit is intangible. However, unless we firmly harness and elevate the spirit, we can't become admirable human beings. The lesson we should draw from this parable is that humankind's highest aims are to elevate the spirit and finally attain buddhahood.

The Ultimate Teaching Should Be Given at Last

Second, the parable tells us that because the Lotus Sutra is the ultimate teaching, giving it to people who are not yet prepared to understand it will only give rise to confusion and puzzlement.

We may readily see in ordinary life that this is exactly the case with studying any discipline or technique: attempting to teach the highest level of anything to a beginner will only confuse him or her. Therefore, the teacher must start with simple things. Then, as the student learns and progresses, the teacher may approach and at last deal with the ultimate matter. This method is suggested by the parable.

The Importance of Basic Practice

This parable also shows us that basic practice is essential in order to attain the ultimate. People today, particularly young people who have received higher education, are often unwilling to start with such basic practice and want to go to an advanced stage immediately. If they neglect basic practice, however, they cannot achieve anything, whether in life or in work. Basic practice is essential to achieving great success. This is what we must learn from the parable of the jewel in the topknot.

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. 141–47.



Seeing Everything as Buddha-Nature

THIS month, we Buddhists observe the anniversary of the birth of Shakyamuni. April is an important month, since as we celebrate Shakyamuni's birthday, we also realize the preciousness of our lives. We should become conscious of our own buddha-nature and renew our vow to make the utmost effort to work for the improvement of our society and the happiness of people in the world.

In his message for this month, President Nichiko Niwano quotes a passage from chapter 12 of the Lotus Sutra, "Devadatta," to remind us of the importance of going beyond biased perspectives. He teaches us that if we take a view that "everything is buddha-nature," revere all things as embodiments of buddha-nature, and believe in other people from the bottom of our heart, our perspective will broaden, our biased views will disappear, and we will become able to see all things clearly.

In order to awaken to our basic human qualities of cheerfulness, kindness, and warmheartedness, I hope we will make this month the time to deeply reflect upon the buddha-nature of ourselves and others.

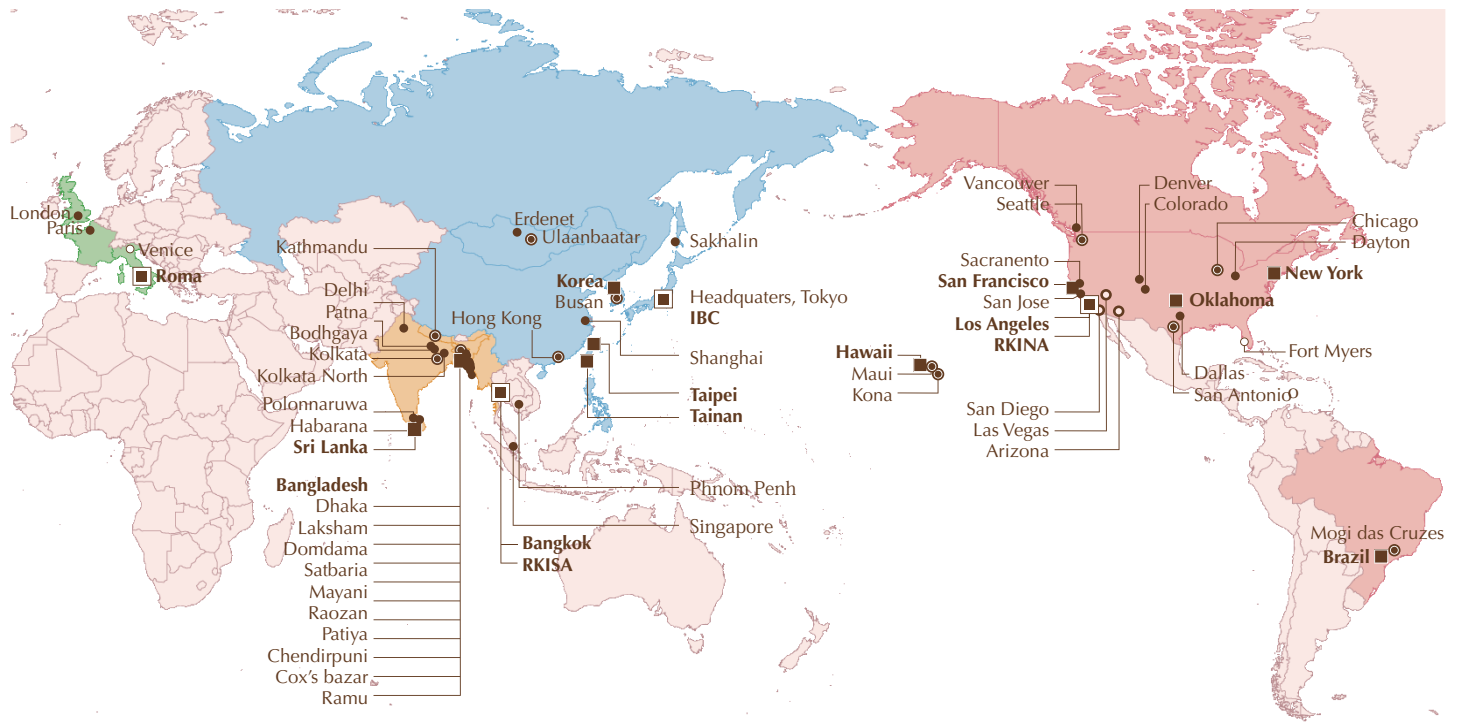
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Rissho Kosei-kai Laksham

Village: Dhupchor, Laksham, Comilla, Bangladesh

Rissho Kosei-kai Cox's Bazar

Ume Burmize Market, Tekpara, Sadar, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Rissho Kosei-kai Cox's Bazar, Ramu Shibu

Rissho Kosei-kai Raozan

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