

Living the Lotus 3

Buddhism in Everyday Life

2024

VOL. 222



Rissho Kosei-kai of Kolkata, Gaya, and Patna in India

Living the Lotus Vol. 222 (March 2024)

Senior Editor: Keiichi Akagawa

Editor: Sachi Mikawa

Copy Editor: Ayshea Wild

Living the Lotus is published monthly by Rissho Kosei-kai International, Fumon Media Center 3F, 2-7-1 Wada, Suginami-ku, Tokyo 166-8537, Japan.

TEL: +81-3-5341-1124 / FAX: +81-3-5341-1224

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

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.



Self-Restraint Comes from Compassion

Rev. Nichiko Niwano
President of Risho Kosei-kai

Self-Restraint Means Being Considerate of Others

“Before sweeping away a spider’s web, / Hidden in a bush by my house, / My broom stops.” This heartwarming poem by Zen master Ryokan (1758–1831), fully conveys his kindness. I can almost see the smile on Ryokan’s face as he suddenly stops sweeping so as not to disturb a spiderweb, recognizing the small living being that is doing its utmost to survive there.

I feel, in this small, spontaneous gesture, that he was a person with self-restraint and a mind of compassion that embraced all things.

Regarding self-restraint, Shakyamuni said, “Exercise restraint in body and speech” and “Restraint in body, speech, and mind is good conduct,” and, as with the humility that I wrote about in last month’s issue, he often spoke of its importance. We tend to take self-restraint as a general guideline for regulating our daily lives, and I think that, as we can see from Ryokan’s poem, self-restraint is one and the same as compassion, isn’t it? According to Dr. Yasuaki Nara (1929–2017), a Buddhist scholar and Soto sect priest, “All of Shakyamuni’s teachings are based upon and expounded from the concept of compassion.” Therefore, because self-restraint deepens the mind of being considerate of others, it can also be interpreted as a teaching of the Buddha’s.

That said, when we ask ourselves if we can exercise as much self-restraint as Ryokan did, we are apt to meekly reply that we are not up to the task. Even so, I hope that to the extent we can, we show consideration for others and exercise restraint through our words and actions.

This is because, to cite the words of Dr. Nara, “Compassion increases and matures by repeatedly acting with—that is, practicing—compassion.” This does not mean that because we have awakened, we give rise to the mind of compassion and can act with deep self-restraint. Rather, this shows us the importance of coming to a realization, in the course of interacting with other people out of consideration for them and restraining our words and actions, that life means we are all connected as one, that self and others are one and the same, and that therein lies our awakening.

From a Familiar Activity to Global Issues

Sixty years ago, on March 4, 1964, the year of the completion of the Great Sacred Hall—our organization's principal place of the Way—Founder Niwano said, "When a religious organization builds a large temple, it starts to lose its substance." He did not mean that because our principal place of practice is large, we are a big organization, or that by building a splendid temple, our organization's development had reached a stage of maturity. Rather, he was telling us the importance of continuing to be the kind of religious organization in which good friends in the faith gather in the Great Sacred Hall, always full of energy as they learn the Buddha's teachings, and that our manifesting humility and exercising self-restraint give warmth and vitality to the minds of the people in our communities and societies.

Indeed, in this sense, it is very meaningful that Rissho Kosei-kai's Donate-a-Meal Movement has been going on for such a long time. I hope that we will continue to value this familiar activity, originally practiced by members of the Shinto-derived religious organization Shoroku Shinto Yamatoyama, by skipping a meal several times a month and donating the money that would have gone toward those meals, thereby putting into practice the mind of compassion and contributing to society.

Furthermore, it would not be possible for colleagues in organizations such as Religions for Peace to transcend the parameters of their own religion or sect and engage in ongoing dialogue aimed at resolving global issues, unless the participants humbly approached each other with self-control and self-restraint. We take pride in the fact that Founder Niwano laid the groundwork for Religions for Peace, but I also think that in order to ensure that such programs do not become empty gestures, it is important that we take action while always remembering humility and considering every situation from the perspective of compassion, which is the basis of Shakyamuni's teachings.

Shakyamuni said that "those who exercise restraint and humility in all situations protect themselves." When we interpret "themselves" as "the self that is one with the whole universe," we are all the more deeply struck by the significance of exercising restraint in our bodies and through our words, and we cannot help but pray that everywhere in the world, everyone is exercising restraint in their bodies and through their words.

From *Kosei*, March 2024



Spiritual Journey

Getting out of a Burning House to the Peaceful World of the Buddha

Mr. Roger Williams
Rissho Kosei-kai of Oklahoma

My name is Roger Williams. I became a member of the Oklahoma Dharma Center in 2010. I count my encounter with Buddhism and with Rissho Kosei-kai as one of the most important, transformative, and unlikely events in my life. And because of the warmth and kindness of the sangha of Rissho Kosei-kai of Oklahoma, and the education program provided by Rissho Kosei-kai, which made the teachings of Founder Niwano and the Lotus Sutra so accessible to me, I am now coming to understand how all the experiences throughout my life led me to Rissho Kosei-kai and to this very moment. I am grateful and humbled by this opportunity to attempt an explanation of that journey to you and through that explanation, to come to an even greater understanding of the teachings.

I was born in 1954 into a very ordinary family in Oklahoma, a state in the West South Central United States. I was the second of two children and six years younger than my sister. My father was from Texas and my mother was from Wisconsin. My father was a World War II veteran and served in the occupation forces in Japan after the war. He was a teacher and the vice president and business manager of the small college located in our town. My mother was a dedicated homemaker. My parents were kind, thoughtful, and generous people, and I was raised in a liberal protestant Christian church.

I didn't have a bad experience in the Christian faith; it just never appealed to me. I had the opportunity to flourish in that loving environment, which I could not take full advantage of due to a disorder. I believe I had what is now referred to as "generalized anxiety" and "impulse control disorder," but such diagnoses were not in common use in that place and time, so I was labeled as a "mean little kid." I couldn't

recognize my parents' responsibility to exercise control over my behavior in order to ensure my safety and wellbeing, and I sometimes deeply resented their strict discipline.

If I had to describe my childhood simply, I would say I was a very impulsive child. If I found something interesting, I would get up from my seat even while eating or start playing in the middle of changing my clothes. While walking outside, I would run towards things that caught my curiosity. I suppose that for my parents, every day was a sequence of tense moments that never gave them peace of mind. I do remember an incident when I walked about two blocks down the street to a large old house, which served as a care home for the elderly and disabled. I remember talking to the residents who were sitting on the front porch, when my mother came down the street to retrieve me, changing color and screaming, "Roger!"



Mr. Roger Williams delivers his Dharma Journey talk at the Oklahoma Dharma Center.



This pattern continued as I entered school, and my inability to moderate my impulses often put me in conflict with my teachers and with other students. Schools at that time practiced various forms of punishment. As I grew older, I adopted the attitude that I could do anything I wanted if I was willing to take the punishment. My misbehavior escalated, and I became a petty thief and a vandal, but I never engaged in any serious criminal activity. I am so grateful that my parents viewed my behavior as a phase that I would eventually grow out of, rather than a psychiatric disorder requiring medication.

While in high school I began experimenting with petrochemical inhalants, then alcohol and drugs. This was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a tumultuous time in the US, when social change such as the anti-Vietnam War movement, the civil rights movement, and psychedelic drug culture permeated the news. I think I was strongly influenced by these trends. By that time, I believed what my father had been saying for years: “Son, you’re just making it hard for yourself.” I decided to make a determined effort to use the move to Oklahoma City as an opportunity to remake myself in a new environment and moderate my behavior, but this idea was quickly derailed by the greatly increased availability of drugs and alcohol there. I became quite absorbed by them and found myself in jail by my eighteenth birthday and confined in a psychiatric hospital by my twentieth.

During my college years, I embarked on a series of adventures with the goal of “finding myself.” I began hitchhiking across the United States, oblivious to the potential dangers and the anxiety I was causing my parents. I ignored their warnings and took to the road. I traveled alone, and the trips, usually lasting from a week or so to over a month, were exhilarating and filled with hundreds of encounters and extraordinary experiences from which I learned a great deal. As it turned out, it was also a daring daylight escape from my problems. Thanks to my parents, who supported me while I was in college, I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in psychology, and I began my career with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services in 1977.

Despite living in such a blessed environment, I

yielded to temptation, and by 1981 I was at another low point with my drug and alcohol abuse. I was missing work frequently, drinking, and taking drugs while on duty. I could no longer control my drinking and, after a short while, became depressed, living in constant fear of losing my job and of dying. At this crucial time, an old high school drinking buddy who had recovered from addiction strongly recommended that I join a self-help group for alcohol addiction. That was when I was twenty-eight years old.

The self-help group offers a supportive environment where individuals come together to share their experiences, struggles, and successes with others who are going through similar challenges, encouraging each other to overcome difficulties. Though people with alcohol addiction want to quit drinking, determining never to drink again, they tend to give in to the temptation and then justify their drinking. The wishful thinking that it will be all right to drink a little rears its head, and before they know it, they are back to drinking in the same way as before.

Alcoholism is called the disease of denial because the main problem is that patients don’t admit they are ill. I denied that I was an alcoholic and didn’t have faith in the recovery program. On the other hand, however, I was terrified by the fact that many of my friends had died from drugs and drinking.

I saw many people who had succeeded in gaining sobriety by attending the recovery group. In the meetings, I talked about my experiences and listened to other members’ experiences. These interactions with other people who had the same struggles provided the mental support and the incredible strength needed to succeed with sobriety. While hearing others describe their stories of alcoholism and drug addiction, it became clear to me that they were not just telling their stories; they were also telling mine. I could now squarely face my inner self and the fact that I was an alcoholic and a drug addict.

It was during this time that I met a girl from California who was traveling through Oklahoma on her way to New York and then Europe. At that time, I was in the middle of the attempt to get sober through the recovery program. I was not honest with her about the seriousness of my condition. There is a certain amount of self-deception and denial of one’s condition

Spiritual Journey

with the disease of alcoholism. My own blindness to my alcoholism also prevented me from recognizing the psychiatric problems she was struggling with, and because she was in denial about her own mental health problems, she could not fully recognize mine.

Without understanding each other, we married after she became pregnant. Then I returned to the recovery program and achieved sobriety in 1982. I was lucky to be spared many of the serious withdrawal symptoms, such as delirium tremens and seizures.

Recovery from alcoholism requires rigorous honesty and an in-depth admission of one's faults and defects of character, followed by the making direct amends for harm done. My wife's response to my admission of defects and attempts to make amends was to seize upon my problems as the cause of her own, which she was incapable of facing honestly. She relentlessly attacked and blamed me for all her failures in life. I later learned from her family that she had been struggling with emotional problems since childhood. In spite of individual therapy and marriage counseling, life together became impossible, and we divorced in 1992.

If we'd both claimed custody, it could have induced severe custody contention, so we had many discussions about custody, putting the welfare of our children first. As a result, we agreed on joint custody of our children, so we could both engage in raising them. Though these were difficult times for the entire family, I'm happy to report that our children have grown up to be healthy, happy adults. My son lives in Los Angeles, and my daughter, who lives locally, has given me the two sweetest grandchildren. The oldest, my granddaughter, started college this year. She is an active member of Rissho Kosei-kai of Oklahoma.

Though I had never felt drawn to religion in my youth, the experience of the addiction recovery programs convinced me that the practice of spiritual principles has significant meaning and a role in my life. I began reading and studying other faith traditions, including Taoism and Buddhism. It was with Buddhism that I felt the greatest connection, and I began searching for a place or a group where I could learn more because I still felt something was missing in my mind, even after my recovery from alcoholism. I visited Vietnamese and Chinese Buddhist temples

but found the lack of teachers fluent in English was a barrier.

In 2010, I was invited by one of my friends to attend the basic teachings classes at the Oklahoma Dharma Center. The idea of "Buddhism for everyday life" appealed to me. When I learned the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Six Paramitas, I was filled with joy and excitement for having discovered this wonderful way of thinking and this outlook I had been searching for all along. At the same time, I found the teachings were very practical problem-solving tools that I could apply to my daily life.

Not only did I find classes in English at the Oklahoma Dharma Center, but also a warm and welcoming sangha with a clearly structured but flexible education program with multiple opportunities for study and practice. I began regularly attending the Thursday night meditation group. This introduced me to *Kyoten*, or "sutra readings," chanting, sitting meditation, and walking meditation. I then began attending the Sunday morning chant services and was introduced to *hoza*, or "Dharma circle," which I immediately recognized as a beneficial practice due to the similarities between *hoza* and the recovery group meetings. Both include participants talking and sharing struggles with one another. The only big difference was that the *hoza* facilitator gave advice to the participants who shared their worries and sufferings, based on the truth of Buddhism, and tried to guide



Mr. Williams leads sutra recitation.



Spiritual Journey

them to the world of the Buddha, wishing to make them happy through this teaching.

In retrospect, my life has drastically changed since I joined Rissho Kosei-kai. The participation in the Rissho Kosei-kai International leader's training seminar held in Tokyo in July, 2017 marked a turning point. In the program, there was an intense Threefold Lotus Sutra course. When I listened to the explanation of the parable of the burning house, I reflected upon my life.

Ever since I was young, I had been giving myself to alcohol and drugs and living only to satisfy my delusions. If I compare my case to the parable of the burning house, I was none other than the children who are absorbed in play and don't realize that their house is on fire. In the parable, their father (the Buddha) saves the children from the burning house by employing skillful means in the form of the three vehicles (the measures to guide the children to the truth). Come to think of it, my joining in the recovery group was the skillful means the Buddha employed for me to encounter the Lotus Sutra.

Since recovering from alcoholism, I continue to attend the self-help group meetings weekly and support the people who suffer from the same addiction I once had, sharing my own experiences. I tell the ones who haven't yet encountered Buddhism that everyone has the wish deep inside to become a good person. And to those who show interest and an understanding of Buddhism, I ask, "Would you like to go to the Dharma center with me?" It has become my pleasure to use my painful past experiences to help people who have the same difficulties and to see the members of the self-help group overcome problems, while I convey the Buddha's teaching to them.

The parable of the burning house teaches us that whatever circumstances we are in, we can surely attain enlightenment if we overcome the worries and sufferings that appear in front of us one by one, according to the teaching. I feel as if I received the great white oxcart, which is the peaceful Buddha's world, by joining Rissho Kosei-kai and learning and practicing the teaching.

Currently my daily practice includes chanting the *Kyoten* each morning at my home altar, followed by twenty minutes of sitting meditation and reading a

variety of Buddhist literature. The ancestor appreciation, which is quite different from my view of ancestry prior to joining Rissho Kosei-kai, played a major role in my spiritual development. I dedicate the merits of my recitation to my deceased ancestors, mentors, and friends who have been important to my personal and spiritual development. I feel this practice has increased the depth of my gratitude for this precious human life, which I so recklessly abused and neglected as a young man. I attend Dharma center activities, either in person or on Zoom, four to six times a week, and I am deeply grateful for the sangha of Rissho Kosei-kai of Oklahoma as well as the larger sangha of Rissho Kosei-kai International of North America and Rissho Kosei-kai International on the internet.

Now, I am truly grateful for becoming a person who can serve others for even a little while, feeling the joy of getting my physical and mental health back after recovering from alcoholism. Above all, I thank the Buddha's great compassion and arrangement that led me to the Oklahoma Dharma Center of Rissho Kosei-kai. I have come to understand the Buddha's deep message lies in all the twists and turns of life. I am determined to continue to study the Buddha's teaching and apply myself more diligently to bodhi-sattva practice, cherishing every encounter with others.



An Introduction to Rissho Kosei-kai Through Comics

Becoming Members of Rissho Kosei-kai

Practicing the Teaching in Our Daily Lives

A lay Buddhist organization is an association of lay people who are putting the Buddha's teachings into practice at home, in the workplace, and in the community to grow spiritually, instead of practicing as monks in the middle of nowhere. Rissho Kosei-kai is one such lay Buddhist organization.

We sometimes get daunted when we practice the teaching alone. So, it is important for us to seek out seniors and companions as our role models, always sharing in true guidance and encouraging each other.



Did You Know?

Rissho Kosei-kai puts importance on the practice of being humble because it can bring out the mind of a buddha within us. The practice of being humble is a significant practice for the perfection of our characters.

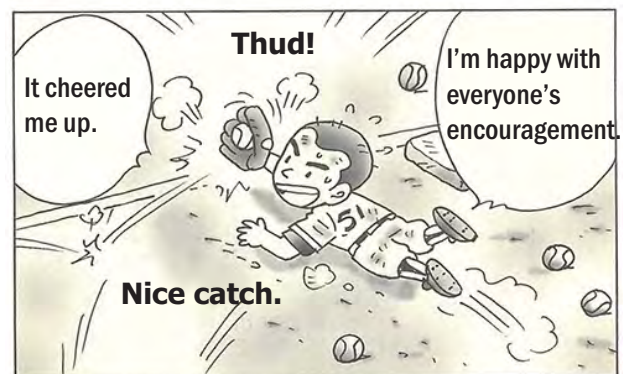
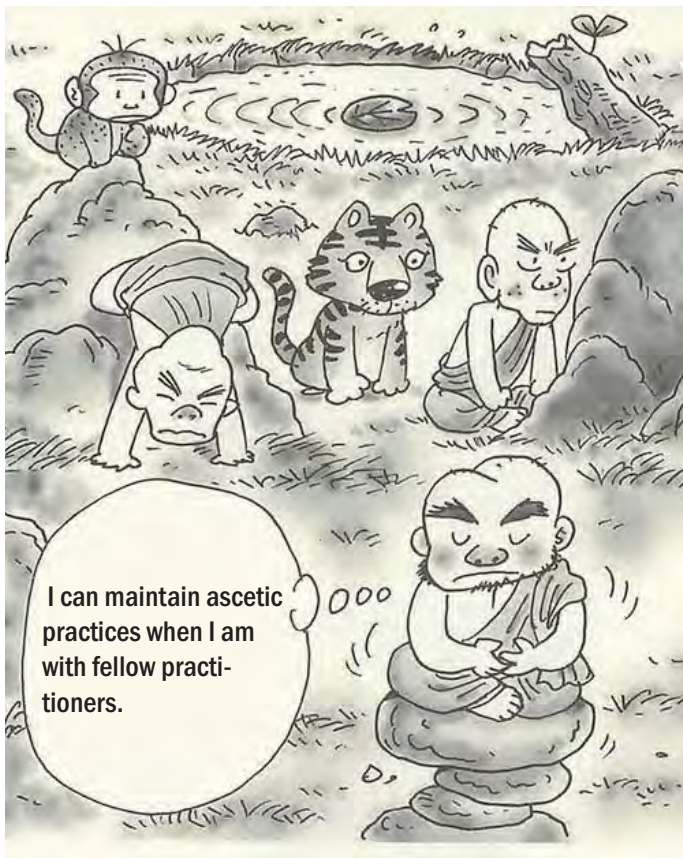


Together with Fellow Members (Sangha)

The teachings of the Buddha are precious because we incorporate them into our daily lives and disseminate them to others. However, if we practice the teachings of the Buddha alone, we get discouraged and hardly continue them. Therefore, as part of the Three Treasures, the Buddha included a gathering of people who learn the teachings together. This gathering of people is called the Sangha, one of the Three Treasures.

When we practice the teachings with fellow members, we can control the lazy mind that tends to arise. Moreover, we can learn from others when there is something we don't understand. We can also improve each other and grow together.

It is essential to have good friends and fellow members.



Did You Know?

Sangha is an ancient Indian word, meaning group or gathering. In Buddhism, it refers to a congregation of practitioners. In Indian Buddhism, members of the sangha were limited to monks and nuns only. In modern Japanese Buddhism, however, sangha members also include lay people.



Germinating the Seeds of Awakening

Chapter 1

Living by Aspiring: Your Point of Departure

You Awaken Yourself by Teaching the Dharma to Others

Rev. Nikkyo Niwano
Founder of Rissho Kosei-kai



Because You Have Taught the Sutra to Others

Earlier, I said there were two reasons why teaching the sutra is important. The second reason is that by teaching the sutra to others, you can truly immerse yourself in the truth of the Dharma and achieve true awakening.



Shakyamuni Buddha affirms this in chapter 20 of the Lotus Sutra, “The Bodhisattva Never Unworthy of Respect,” when he reveals, “In the presence of all of those former buddhas, I received, embraced, read, and recited this sutra and taught it for the benefit of other people. Therefore, I quickly attained Supreme Perfect Awakening.”

“Supreme Perfect Awakening” refers to the awakening of a buddha. Shakyamuni is saying that because he expounded this teaching for the sake of others, he could attain the awakening of a buddha. This is how important it is to teach the sutra to others.

When you try introducing people to the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, unless you are a truly exceptional person, you will distinctly feel that you are still far from grasping the truth of the Dharma yourself. At that point you will read the sutra’s commentaries again, consult with more senior members of the sangha, and reflect on the teachings yourself. By doing so, you’ll improve yourself without even realizing it.

My teacher, Mr. Sukenobu Arai, was very skilled at calligraphy. When I asked him how he had practiced it, he told me that he opened a calligraphy school, and in the process of teaching children, his handwriting improved. Even in the case of arts such as singing or shamisen (a type of three-stringed Japanese banjo), it is said that one’s skill improves through beginning to teach others. Connecting people with the Dharma is the same.

It’s not just about cramming your head with theory; it’s by gaining practical experience, interacting with many people, and repeating the process of trial and error that you truly acquire what’s called the “power of skillful means.” This is how your ability to be a bodhisattva grows.

Depending on the person, they may ignore you, and they may react negatively. The effort and resourcefulness you summon to, in one way or another, help these people understand the teachings elevates and expands your own self. Of course, there are also people who listen receptively and are liberated completely. There is something about the joy of connecting such people with the Dharma that is incomparable.

In other words, it’s about hands-on practice. It’s about experience. You enhance your humanity through experience, and by accumulating experience you gain depth as a human being.

In Zen, there is a saying: “If you sit in meditation for even a moment, you are a buddha for that moment.” This means that even if you sit in meditation for just the time it takes to burn a stick of incense, for that period, you can have the mind of the Buddha.

I’d like to rephrase this as “If you connect one person with the Dharma, you are a buddha to the extent of one person.” Since the word “buddha” refers to an “awakened person,” if you connect a person with the Dharma, that gives rise to a proportional awakening. I can fully guarantee this based on my many years of experience.

After all, the Lotus Sutra is a teaching for the real-life liberation of people and of the world. For this reason, unless we share the teaching with as many people as possible and help them attain liberation, we won’t be able to express our gratitude for the compassion of Shakyamuni Buddha who gave us this teaching. I sincerely hope that you will inscribe this deeply into your hearts and make even greater efforts to teach the Lotus Sutra to others.

Bodai no me o okosashimu (Kosei Publishing, 2018), pp.46-48

Director's Column

The Origin of Liberation Written in the Dedicatory Text

Rev. Keiichi Akagawa
Director, Rissho Kosei-kai International

Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for taking the time to read my column again this month. The title of the President's message for March is "Self-Restraint Comes from Compassion." When I read the message, the first thing that came to mind was the phrase "the three actions of body, speech, and mind."

Inside the Eternal Buddha enshrined in the Great Sacred Hall, there is a dedicatory text expressing the Founder's determination to install the statue of the Eternal Buddha as the focus of devotion and a copy of the Threefold Lotus Sutra in his own hand. In October 1960, when the copy of the Lotus Sutra was completed, the following passage was included in the dedicatory text: "Training to receive and hold the three acts of body, speech, and mind of the three vehicles is itself the great and direct way to the wondrous abode of nirvana." Through the practice of the three vehicles, such as the "Four Noble Truths," "Twelve Causes and Conditions," and "Six Paramitas," we learn the importance of preparing the three kinds of acts, physical, verbal, and mental, and enhancing our relationships until they are filled with joy and hope.

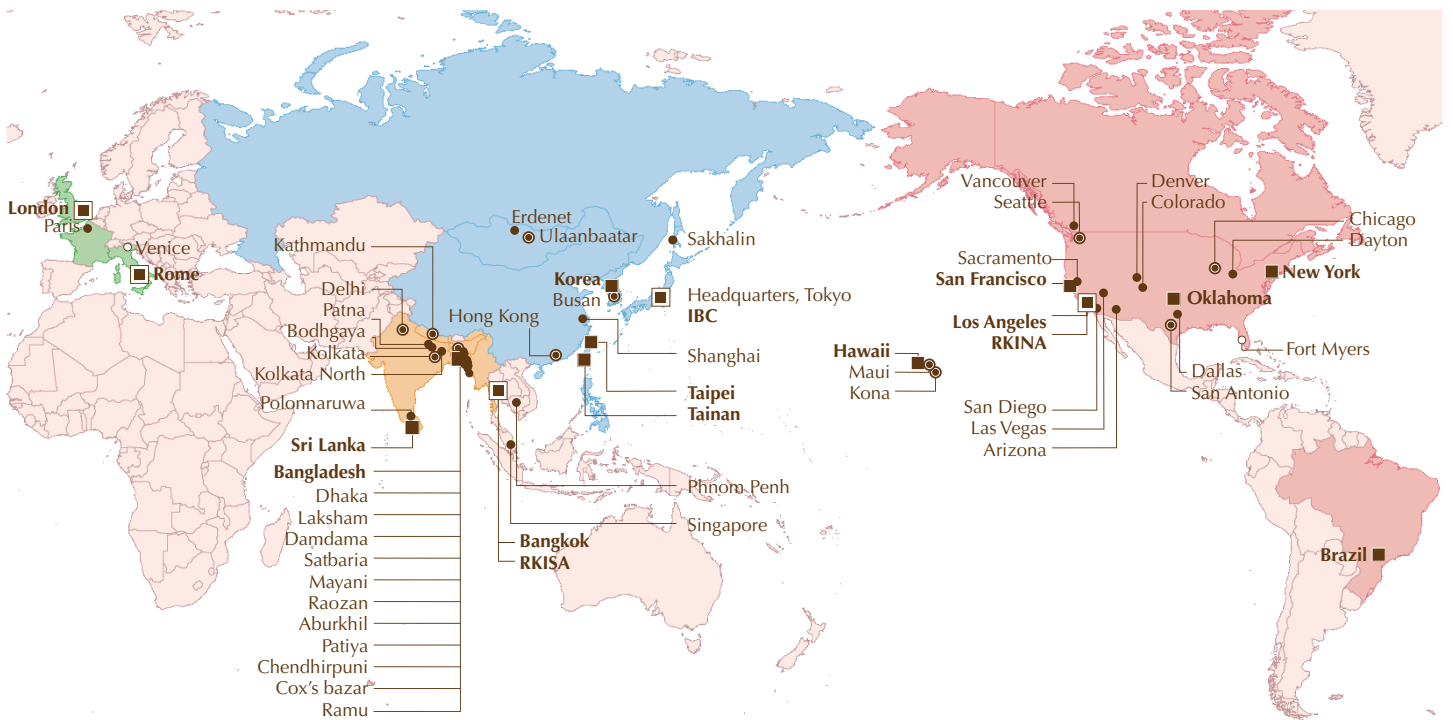
"The perfection of ourselves" that we Rissho Kosei-kai members aim for begins with living modestly and with consideration for those around us in our daily lives. This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the construction of the Great Sacred Hall. Now is the time to take in the dedicatory text containing the Founder's thoughts, with all our hearts, and rededicate ourselves to practicing compassion.



On October 29, 2023, members from overseas branches participated in the Dharma Teacher Qualification Presentation Ceremony. (Director Akagawa is second from the left in the front row in front of the main entrance of the Great Sacred Hall.)



🌸 *A Global Buddhist Movement* 🌸



Information about
local Dharma centers

facebook

twitter

