

Spiritual Journey

My Satori Story — The Happiness Found in the Practice of Gratitude

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This Dharma Journey talk was delivered on July 4, 2021, during the ceremony marking the twentieth anniversary of Rissho Kosei-kai of Oklahoma.

I WOULD like to begin by thanking everyone present for the opportunity to share my Dharma Journey. Your donation of time and deep listening make this experience possible, and I feel deep gratitude to you.

My parents divorced when I was a year old, never again seeing my father. Much of my first five years were spent in the hospital with recurring respiratory illness, isolated from children my own age, always surrounded by adults.

Staying out of daycare centers reduced the frequency of pneumonia, but being accustomed to only being around adults made starting school difficult. Being raised by a single mother who worked, I spent a lot of time left alone at home or without contact with anyone while she slept all day after work. I remember feeling very lonely and isolated because of the social activities I missed, and being aware that other children had a father in their life while I did not. Intense feelings of loneliness and abandonment are part of my earliest memories.

My mom's brother lived with us frequently from the time I was a newborn till I was fourteen years old. He drank heavily and used cocaine, and sold illegal drugs as well. He was frequently irritable, harshly critical of people around him, and sometimes violent.

When I was nine years old, my mother remarried to my adoptive father, John. My memories of experiences with him are all positive; having him around always felt safe and his being part of my life was a dream come true. He was killed in a work-related incident nine months after the wedding. At the time of his death, my mother was pregnant and I have a younger brother whom I am very close to. After the birth of my brother, the years following were tremendously

stressful for the whole family. My mother experienced many medical problems and depression as the result of the sudden loss of her husband. At the same time that I lost one parent to death, my other parent was unavailable.

During childhood, my greatest craving was for life to be different than it was. I did understand death was part of life but I was very bitter about losing John. I viewed the world around me as cruel, uncaring, and hostile. It felt as if I was often under threat and usually powerless. Life felt more like a punishment than a gift. I felt anger about being born instead of feeling gratitude.

When I was seventeen years old, my mother remarried for a final time. My stepfather was a war veteran with PTSD and alcoholism. He was violent and always had a loaded gun on him. His behavior with guns added constant threat to daily life as he commonly used intimidation with a gun to manipulate and control anyone near him.



Chris Peters shares his Dharma Journey talk at the twentieth anniversary celebration of Rissho Kosei-kai of Oklahoma.

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By the time I was eighteen years old, there had been several adults in my life that had been sources of mental, emotional, and physical abuse. I resented the adults that provided an unsupportive, unsafe home and that frequently pushed messages of racism, bigotry, and hate. At this point in life, I had memories of dealing with toxic adult types of problems since I was three years old. One habit that kept me going and alive through all of the stress was visualizing a future that would be different from the life I had survived so far. I had a deep desire to have a better adulthood than the childhood I experienced.

I was relieved to be finishing high school and have the opportunity to leave my hometown to build a life for myself that was based on my decisions. This time was bittersweet because I had the opportunity to express the independence that most eighteen year olds feel, but growing up in an unsafe home left me feeling doubtful that it was ever safe to allow myself to be close to anyone.

College was wonderful experience! Classes were sometimes challenging but I had the opportunity to regulate my home environment, and this new-found sense of stability provided the opportunity to begin healing. My interests of study included education, social work, and science. My potential areas of study always involved the desire to be in service to others while gaining the ability to support myself. It seems like the pain and challenges I experienced taught me to care about the difficulties others faced. When it was time to decide on a major, I chose occupational and environmental health and safety (OEH).

OEH appeared to be a good fit because it provided to me the opportunity to work in areas that improved the safety of homes, work spaces, and communities. After college, I started career life by investigating the same types of occupational incidents that took my father away from our family. I had to learn the difficult way that a fatality investigation job was not a

healthy situation for me, and I now see it was not “right livelihood” then either. This marked a temporary period that I tried escaping from my emotions by using alcohol excessively. Alcohol use at the time was also relevant to the discomfort I felt towards being around people. I carried a heavy feeling that if my family of origin could be so harmful to me, it was doubtful that anyone in the world was truly loving and safe to be close to. My upbringing wasn’t an environment that offered a lot of lessons about healthy coping skills, but it became evident to me that abusing alcohol as a way of dealing with my stresses was both unwise and counterproductive. I am remorseful for the ways I was difficult towards others while expressing my suffering, and before I took responsibility for my health.

While teaching in public schools for five years, a coworker gifted a book on Daoism to me that sparked my interest in Eastern philosophy. On the inside cover was the handwritten message: “If you want your life to change, change the way you think.” This quote reminds me of Founder Rev. Nikkyo Niwano’s quote: “If you change, others will change.”

I spent a few years reading about Daoism and Buddhism, but I was only using an intellectual approach and not one of practice. It took about fifteen years after I moved away from home for me to heal enough that past traumas did not interfere with my ability to socially function in a way that I always wanted to. In 2013, during the same week I turned thirty-five, I decided to visit the Dharma Center of Oklahoma. The experiences I had with religion during childhood had been negative, so it took me a few years to move past the hesitation of approaching a church.

I took a rapid liking to Buddhism at the Dharma center! I enjoyed the Basic Buddhism classes, meditation, and Sunday morning services. I found a welcoming group of people that treated me and each other with

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loving kindness. I found good friends in Rissho Kosei-kai of Oklahoma. As I learned more, I even discovered that one of Founder Rev. Nikkyo Niwano's highest aspirations was to achieve world peace through a path of interfaith dialogue and actions. The family and church I had grown up in was very hostile to other religions and nationalities, so the inclusivity of Rissho Kosei-kai both locally and globally was a joyous discovery! It was a relief to find a safe spiritual home.

In contrast to the childhood environment I've described, the Dharma Center of Oklahoma was different in countless ways. One example of this difference: A small group of us were repairing a wood fence outside and I was operating an electric saw that belonged to another member. I've had plenty of experience with power tools but had grown accustomed to the cordless type and was out of the habit of watching out for the power cord. I cut the power cord of the saw and this caused me great embarrassment! I was frustrated with myself for making this mistake and out of habit, also anticipated a negative reaction from others. In that moment I was not applying compassion to myself. The other member involved recognized what I had done and responded in a caring way. He was happy I had only damaged the cord and not injured myself. His reaction showed me what was most important to him was not his tools, but instead my well-being. He modeled to me the compassion I had been unable to offer myself when I made a mistake. This experience with the sangha contained a great amount of healing.

For me, it shows through experiences that Rissho Kosei-kai Dharma centers are indeed places of the way, where awakening occurs, where the Dharma Wheel is turned in daily life, and where members find and create healing for themselves and each other.

In study and practice, I've learned the liberating side of impermanence and interconnectedness, how to reduce my habit of immediately judging life events

as gain or loss, and how to use the Four Noble Truths to process events and emotions. The Ten Suchnesses and Twelve Link Chain of Causation are useful in observation, self-reflection, and purification. I've been taught that my sense of compassion is only complete when it includes myself; this is a lesson passed on to me by the actions of both local and distant sangha members. The present moment blossoms when I am fully in the here and now. Regardless of the challenges in my childhood, taking refuge in the Three Treasures and practicing the Eightfold Path and the Six Perfections has illustrated to me through experience that Buddhism offers liberation to anyone that practices. This is my Faith and Understanding gained through living the Dharma.

After spending the past several years in study and practice, I can look back on my childhood to recognize that life provided necessary events for me to appreciate the present moment. For this transformation to happen, my focus had to change from external to internal. Letting go of attachments made room for the changes life has to offer and for new habits to form. I had the opportunity to experience that while interconnectedness sometimes brought painful events, it also offered sources of healing and liberation. Releasing attachment to toxic relationships made space in my life for other people to arrive that had healthy influences to donate. Letting go is never a loss but instead an opportunity. The healing I've experienced did require my effort but it was not done alone; this healing involved the efforts of many people.

My Satori is to realize that the childhood I was once resentful for living through is one that I now feel deep gratitude for. Trying circumstances have a way of teaching greater appreciation for peaceful circumstances. It is empowering to realize that difficulties are part of the path that lead to encounters with the Three Treasures, the Lotus Sutra, and the discovery of my own buddha nature and the buddha nature of others.

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Everything most important to me, my existence, friends and family, and the comforts found in life are exceptionally fragile. Those parts of my life that are most important must be held with gratitude before impermanence places them outside my human reach.

I am aware of losses in this saha world experienced by all humans. I also see life through the practice of gratitude. Transcending difficulties of life provides learning and meaning for my spirit. It is a blessing to catch even brief glimpses of the passage from chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, “The Life Span of the Eternal Tathagata”:

When living beings see great fires burning
At the time of this kalpa’s end,
This land of mine is tranquil and calm,
Always filled with heavenly beings and humans.
Its gardens, groves, halls, and pavilions
Are adorned with every kind of gem,
And its jeweled trees are full of blossoms and fruit.

I am amazed that hidden splendor is always among the illusionary flames, while support is always offered by the Buddha and many others in service to him.



Mr. Peters enjoys a conversation with fellow sangha members in the parking lot outside the Dharma Center of Oklahoma.

Thank you to Founder Nikkyo Niwano, Cofounder Myoko Naganuma, President Nichiko Niwano, and all Teachers in Buddhism and in life.

