



Realizing the Worth of Being Alive



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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.

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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

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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.