

Living the Lotus

Buddhism in Everyday Life

New Year's Issue

 **New Year's Message**

Coming to Greatness

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May We Follow the Way with Energy and Liveliness
Accepting that Our Places of the Way Are the Here and Now



I wish you all a happy New Year.

With the status of COVID-19 virus downgraded to Category 5 (under Japan's Infectious Diseases Control Law), people's sense of crisis seems to have rapidly faded. There are fewer people wearing masks now. But I also hear that some people are rather concerned about this trend. We need to be particularly considerate of the elderly, people with diseases, and persons who can't tolerate vaccinations, and we must keep them in mind going forward.

The first case of COVID-19 in Japan was confirmed in January 2020. In the "Guidelines for Members' Practice of the Faith for 2020" that I presented in November 2019, I wrote, "Looking forward to the one hundredth anniversary of Rissho Kosei-kai, I hope that each of us will be firmly resolved to repay our debt of gratitude to our predecessors, in the spirit of 'This place is indeed the place of the Way.'"

As we continue to lead lives of self-restraint due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have come to realize just how important the spirit is that is embodied by the expression, "This place is indeed the place of the Way."

As we all know, the expression, “This place is indeed the place of the Way” is the first passage of “Meditation on the Place of the Way,” found at the beginning of the *Kyoten* (Sutra Readings). It means for us that the places of the Way are not just our Great Sacred Hall or our Dharma centers, but also the places where we are at present, where we live, and where we belong, such as our homes and places of work, our schools, and our local communities. It means that all of these are the places of the Way that improve our minds.

Not only in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic but at any time, it is the here and now that are our own places of the Way and our path to seeking awakening. Walking this way mindfully is our Buddha Way.

Many people have been affected physically, financially, and mentally by the COVID-19 pandemic. It must also be said that many are having difficulty recovering and are worried about their futures.

There is the expression, “A single day is like a thumbnail sketch of one’s entire life.” It means that what a person’s entire life will be like can be seen by observing it today, for one day. We live not in the past, not in the future, but only now, in this instance. Let us help each other in the sangha and always devote ourselves with energy and liveliness.

With these thoughts in mind, I offer my “Guidelines for Members’ Practice of the Faith for 2024” as follows.

“Instead of merely being content with the real world as it is, we human beings seek infinitely higher, more precious, and greater things. This desire gives rise to the mind of reverence. When this mind of reverence develops, it inevitably leads us to reflect upon the comparatively inadequate state of our own lives, and to a growing feeling of discontent with our shortcomings. The most important things for the progress and improvement of humanity are to nurture the mind of reverence, and as a result, discontent with our inadequacies.”

With these words above, well-expressed by an elder describing the mindset that is important for a human being, let us again commit ourselves together through our faith, as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and as parents to somehow foster the young children and adolescents who will be bearing the next generation. We must put our family relationships in order, with the aim of shaping their characters. We must also move forward to achieve a splendid country by carrying on its best traditions. I hope that we will all work earnestly and creatively toward these goals.

**For Human Beings to Progress and Improve,
the Most Important Things Are to Nurture the Mind of Reverence,
and As a Result, Discontent with Our Inadequacies**

The “elder” mentioned in the Guidelines is Masahiro Yasuoka (1898–1983), who was known as an authority on Eastern philosophy and political philosophy.

As the human mind developed over a long period of several hundred thousand years, human beings eventually acquired intelligence and understanding and became able to express themselves in speech and writing. There are a lot of differences

between humans and other animals, but the most decisive is said to be that humans possess the mind of “reverence” and a feeling of “discontent with our shortcomings.”

The reverent mind is not merely content with the real world as it is. Rather, it seeks infinitely higher, more precious and greater things, and attempts to approach these.

For example, members of our organization revere the Buddha, looking upwards and then bowing their heads and pressing their palms together in a gesture of reverence. Each one endeavors to grasp the true nature of the Buddha’s teaching, to assimilate that realization, and vows to become a person who puts this into practice and builds upon it. Rather than wishing for our personal wishes to be granted, we strive and pray that we may approach a higher ground.

Closer to home, there are members who admire our cheerful, kind, and warm-hearted senior members, and strive to be like them.

There are all kinds of persons—luminaries and sages in history, learned masters, athletes, intellectuals, and others—who have served as ideals or role models.

We may feel dissatisfied with our uncompleted selves, and want to progress and improve by getting closer, even if only slightly, to a higher state. This is an instinct that is inherent in all of us. That instinct is the wellspring by which the human mind has grown.

As such a reverential mind develops, one naturally reflects upon one’s own inadequacies, giving rise to a feeling of discontent.

When we look up the meaning of “discontent” in a dictionary, it can mean “dissatisfaction,” and in this sense, it means “to be aware of and embarrassed by mistakes, shortcomings, faults, and inadequacies of one’s own conduct.” Our own shortcomings are hard for us to notice ourselves. But through encountering people whom we admire or who have excelled at what they do, we are made to realize that we are still lacking experience. The resulting feeling of discontent provides the impetus for us to increase our self-control and self-discipline and to make more of an effort.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius wrote, “By reading books you can count the wise philosophers of the past as friends.” Similarly, by reading the sutras and other scripture we can learn from the sages and reflect on ourselves.

Therefore, the most important things for human beings to do in order to progress and improve are to develop a respectful mind and to have a feeling of discontent.

Reverence and a feeling of discontent with our shortcomings are essentially one and the same. Reverence leads to religion, and discontent leads to morality. So it is important to consider that religion and morality are never separate things, but they are originally one and the same.

Carry Out Human Education and Character Formation in the Home and Create a Splendid Nation Based on Japanese Tradition

Again, in this year's Guidance, as in last year's, I am indicating that the fundamental issue is how we, as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, and as parents, will foster the boys and girls as well as the adolescents who will be bearing the next generation. We must put our family relationships in good order, with the aim of building their characters. We should also pass along the best traditions of our respective cultures in order to achieve splendid countries. It is my hope that we will all work together creatively and earnestly toward these goals.

It is extremely important in raising our young children and adolescents to implement the practice of *seika* (putting family relationships in order) centered on a Buddhist altar in our households, which are the smallest unit of society. It is through this practice that strong human education and character formation take place.

I have previously introduced you to the expression, "The father should be the role model for the child. The mother should be the seat of compassion. This is because the family is like a seedbed for nurturing children."

It is said that children naturally have respect for their fathers and love for their mothers, also that they learn by observing what their parents say and do, and imitate them.

I believe that this is why, in the case of the father, the most crucial thing is that he be worthy of the child's respect. Even while he is focused on his work he should take care to avoid neglecting his family. He should not lecture his children unilaterally. On his days off he should not go around the house looking slovenly.

Mothers accept and warmly love their children unconditionally, no matter what that child may be. It can be said that a mother's love is such that even after her children grow up and get ahead in life, she still worries about them and feels regretful, fretting about how much they will have to work.

The children of such parents grow up healthy.

In recent years successive crises, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the clashes between Israeli and Palestinian forces, have resulted in many casualties. Additionally, poverty, climate change, environmental destruction, water and food shortages, and natural disasters are just a few of the problems that are accumulating.

The challenges are complex and not going to be solved overnight, but we must continually move forward, step by step, without giving up.

As I have pointed out before, the name for Japan in ancient times was Yamato ("Great Peace"), and the national ideal was to embrace the spirit of "Great Peace" and "Great Harmony."

Prince Shotoku (574–622), in Article 1 of his Seventeen-Article Constitution, stated that "harmony is precious."

I believe that this spirit is a universal view of peace that applies not only to Japan, but to all countries and regions.

As we continue our Japanese traditions, the important course for us to take is to make Japan firmly a nation of peace and influence the world by doing so.

At the same time, we should be compassionate in word and deed and undertake

bodhisattva practice in our places of work, in our schools, and in our communities and homes. Let us carry on steadily even if it is not appreciated.

There is a saying, “One lantern illuminates only a corner, but many lanterns illuminate everywhere.” The first part means you are the lantern illuminating your surroundings. The second part refers to that one lantern becoming a part of many lanterns, brightly illuminating the whole world.

I believe we must start that progress by taking those first steps forward ourselves.

In the course of living our lives we may encounter unexpected and difficult events. It is because of such suffering and sadness, however, that we humans develop an awakened mind to overcome these difficulties.

The spirit of “This place is indeed the place of the Way” is to accept these adversities as “a chance to grow and develop the mind” and approach the matters at hand with honesty and sincerity. It is nothing less than cultivating our Buddhist hearts.

It is my hope that each one of us pursues higher and greater things, using our own inadequacies as a springboard, and that we progress and improve, step by step.

Kosei Shinbun • Year End / New Year Edition, December 25, 2023