

Founder Nikkyō Niwano and *Sūtra* Recitation

Awakening to One's and Others' Buddha-nature

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Risshō Kōsei-kai (RKK) was founded by Nikkyō Niwano in 1939 to awaken the Buddha-nature in everyone. RKK's faith practices are developed for achieving this purpose. The founder manifested "sūtra recitation" as an important practice following the teaching of "the five practices of teachers of the Dharma." This article examines the five Lotus Sūtra, practices: (1) "receiving and keeping," (2) "reading" and (3) "reciting," (4) "expounding" and (5) "copying." The author explains how in these practices one listens to the preaching of the Buddha, shows their appreciation, and grasps the true intention of the Buddha. In this way, the author argues, one can become a person who can revere the Buddha-nature in everyone including oneself.

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Risshō Kōsei-kai's Purpose: Awakening the Buddha-nature of All People

In 1938, Nikkyō Niwano founded the Risshō Kōsei-kai (RKK) in Japan. What purpose did he have? The founder of RKK was born and lived until he was 18 years old in a mountain village, Suganuma of Niigata prefecture. The person who greatly influenced the founder was his grandfather, Jūtarō Niwano. From the founder's infancy, his grandfather repeatedly said to him that "human beings must do something for the sake of others. . . . Be a good boy. Don't cause anyone any trouble. And grow up to be a man who does good for others."

When the founder encountered the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*, he was very moved because in it he could completely recognize the meaning of his grandfather's words "grow up to be a man who can help people and the world." His grandfather's words came into line with the purpose of Buddha's appearance in the world, which is one of the important concepts of the *Lotus Sūtra*: "opening appearance, entering enlightenment." Its meaning is that: the purpose of the Buddha's appearance in the world is to awaken the Buddha-nature everyone has, to show the knowledge and insight of the Buddha, and to enlighten others to that knowledge and help them to enter the Buddha way. He really understood in the depth of his mind that what he had heard from his infancy coincided with the true vow of the Buddha to "manifest the Buddha-nature that dwells in us all."¹ Taking this vow of the Buddha as his own, he founded RKK.

1. Nikkyō Niwano, *Sha byō mu i, Risshō Kōsei-kai* (Tokyo: Kosei, 2008), pp. 44–45.

Awakening Buddha-nature, and the Five Practices of Teachers of the Dharma

The teaching of RKK is a teaching for “awakening the Buddha-nature of every living being.” According to the founder, the Buddha-nature appears through the practice of the bodhisattva and through becoming one with the eternal Buddha that is described in the *Lotus Sūtra*. In Chapter 10 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the important practices of the bodhisattva who wants to spread widely this *sūtra* is taught as “the five practices of teachers of the Dharma” that is the practice to become one with the Buddha.² The five practices are divided into (1) “receiving and keeping” the *sūtra* (*juji*), (2) “reading” and (3) “reciting” it (*doku* and *ju*), and (4) “expounding” and (5) “copying” it (*gesetsu* and *shosha*).³

The first practice is “receiving and keeping” (*juji*). “Receiving” (*ju*) indicates believing deeply in the teachings of the Buddha, and “keeping” (*ji*) means to adhere firmly to that belief. Both receiving and keeping together indicate reaffirming each moment one’s vow to follow the teaching of the Buddha. This practice is called the “intensive practice” and the other four practices are the “assisting practices.”

The first two of the assisting practices are “reading” and “reciting.” “Reading” means actually reading the *sūtra*; this practice includes reading it aloud, reading it silently, and listening intently to others’ reading it. “Reciting” means to recite the *sūtra* from memory. This practice includes the repetition of the words of the *sūtra* that we have learned by heart and the mental repetition of

their meaning. It could be said that we should call both reading and reciting together by the name “*sūtra* recitation.” That is one of the fundamental practices of RKK. The teaching becomes deeply rooted in our minds through repeated reading of or reciting the *sūtra*.

The third of the assisting practices, or the fourth of the five practices of the Dharma teacher, is “expounding.” “Expounding” means to explain the meaning of the *sūtra* to others. It means not only to explain thoughts and words, but also to spread knowledge of the *sūtra* and to make others understand the compassion of the Buddha through the lives of those who are following the teaching of the Buddha. While expounding the *sūtra* to others, we will often be led to reflect upon the insufficiency of our own faith and discernment. The last of the list of the practices is “copying.” This means to copy the *sūtra* by hand. This practice causes us to deepen our own faith and discernment and to spread the teaching.⁴

We dealt with the four practices for assisting “receiving and keeping,” which is the intensive practice. That “reading” and “reciting” are positioned as the first two of the four make us understand that it is very important at first that we repeatedly read the *sūtra* aloud and recite it in order to have the teaching take deep root in our mind and heart. This helps us to believe and adhere firmly to the teaching of the Buddha, renewing our vow to the Buddha every moment. Spreading the teaching widely to others comes from this.

It might be said that the level of “receiving” and “keeping” is a condition of becoming one with the Buddha, so it is one of the conditions that absolutely must be fulfilled. To reach such a condition, there are the four assistant practices: “reading,” “reciting,”

2. See, Nikkyō Niwano’s preaching in Fumon Hall on May 25, 1970, in *Kai chō sensei Go Hōwa Senshū* (Gakurin Seminary Edition), p. 143.

3. Nikkyō Niwano, *Buddhism for Today, A Modern Interpretation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1980), p. 140.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 140–141.

“expounding,” and “copying.” These five practices together are for oneself and others to become one with the Buddha.

As mentioned previously, the teaching of RKK is the teaching for manifesting the Buddha-nature that dwells in us all. This does not mean that we cannot achieve the level of awareness of it without some special practice apart from our ordinary life. As the first two practices of the teaching of the five practices of the Dharma teacher, the fundamental practice is to do “reading” and “reciting” of the *sūtra*, which assists “receiving and keeping.” Concretely, that is the *sūtra* recitation practice we do every morning and evening in our ordinary life at our home altar or at the Dharma Center.

The founder also repeatedly continued to practice from prior to founding RKK to the moment of entering Nirvana. In accordance with the founder, by doing *sūtra* recitation, we become able to practice Buddhism so that we can make other persons aware of their own Buddha-nature. Through our *sūtra* recitation practice, we can become aware of messages of the Buddha. We also can feel gratitude to the Buddha. Through our *sūtra* recitation practice we develop sincere motivation for bodhisattva practice and the practice of revering Buddha-nature.

Spiritual Awakening and Gratitude in *Sūtra* Recitation

The founder said that *sūtra* recitation always gave him some awakening. He said:

[*Sūtra* reciting is] an opportunity to hear with our own ears the Buddha’s discourses. Although I have been reading the *sūtra* morning and evening now for more than sixty years, sometimes a phrase strikes me and I realize that I have finally understood what the *sūtra* has been saying. At such

times I feel as if I have been given the opportunity to listen intently to the Buddha’s words so that I can truly understand them.⁵

According to the founder, “by reciting the Buddha’s teachings, we give ourselves the opportunity to listen to them.”⁶ In reciting the *sūtra*, we read so that we ourselves can hear. Every morning and evening, we sit with our backs and heads upright before the family altar, and recite the *sūtra* slowly and loudly. Through such *sūtra* recitation practice, we can achieve a condition in which we hear the teaching of the Buddha through our own voice. If we really understand that the moment of *sūtra* recitation is the time of directly receiving the teaching from the Buddha, although we recite the same sentences, we come to realize a new discovery and recognize it every time with joy.

Every time we do the *sūtra* recitation, we receive the teaching of the Buddha depending on the condition of our heart or mind at that moment. This is implied in a scene in the *sūtra* where the Buddha reveals the eternity of his life and his authentic intention. The Buddha says in Chapter 16 that “since I became a Buddha, innumerable hundreds of thousands of billions of countless numbers of eons have passed.” Although the Buddha says that “I am always here teaching the Dharma,” he appears to teach the Dharma for those who are “faithful, honest, upright and gentle, and wholeheartedly want to see the Buddha,” and who “adore and yearn for (him) and who are full of longing.” This means that we cannot hear the Buddha’s real messages that he is always sending us without a

5. Niwano, *Sha byō mu i*, 7.

6. Ibid.

desire on our part to see him and to know his true intention and compassion. Although his message is for all living beings on the earth, it comes from the level beyond the human scale. He says that “In order to liberate the living, as a skillful means I appear to enter Nirvana. Yet truly I am not extinct.” He teaches living beings using skillful means that are beyond human thought; moreover he always is sending his message to us. In fact, the Buddha himself says in the *sūtra* that “I always know which living beings practice the Way and which do not. In accord with what they need to be saved, I share various teachings for them.”⁷

Each time during the *sūtra* recitation, the founder, devoting himself to the Buddha, heard the teaching of the Buddha, and newly realized meaningful messages through phrases that struck him. Therefore, it can be said that *sūtra* recitation practice is one of the practices of devoting ourselves to the Buddha. In one of the sections of the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*, “The *Sūtra* of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue,” there is a phrase: “Believe deeply the causes and results of things, to have faith in the way of one reality, and to know that the Buddha is never extinct.”⁸ The founder interpreted this as follows: “The way of the one reality refers to the bodhisattva path of Mahāyāna, which promises us all will become Buddhas together. If we believe in and practice this bodhisattva path diligently, the Buddha will always be with us.”⁹ Through the practice of *sūtra* recitation, if we devote ourselves to the Buddha, we will be able to really feel that the Buddha will be

with us. Since the founder himself had this experience, he, in his full confidence, urged us all to believe in the same way.

Through the *sūtra* recitation we can experience the feeling of being with the Buddha. This feeling makes us continually practice the teaching of the Buddha in ordinary life, and encourages us to tell other people about our feeling. Then, we become a person who can do nothing but teach the Dharma to others. This is the practice of “expounding” and “copying,” two of the five practices of the Dharma teacher. I think this is also one of the founder’s aims in teaching us to do *sūtra* recitation practice.

Human beings are not good at turning their thoughts to and believing in what is not before our gaze. The founder says:

It is as if [they] see the tree growing above the earth, yet never give a thought to the roots underground that sustain its life. . . . The great tree towering majestically overhead is sustained by the roots that we cannot see. . . . Branches and leaves burst into life because of the water and nourishment the roots take in, and . . . the leaves are able to receive the blessings of both sun and air . . . human beings are exactly the same. Our lives are sustained by all our invisible forebears, who have passed on their lives to us and made us what we are today. We also are made what we are by the support of all those around us. Considering this, we cannot but marvel at this mystery of life.¹⁰

According to the founder, “gratitude to our ancestors, who like the warp of a cloth have given us our lives,” together with “gratitude

7. *The Lotus Sūtra, a Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic*, trans. by Gene Reeves (Boston, Wisdom Publication, 2008), p. 299.

8. *The Threefold Lotus Sūtra, Innumerable Meanings, The Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law, and Meditation on the Bodhisattava Universal Virtue*, trans. by Bunno Kato, Yoshiro Tamura, and Kojiro Miyasaka (Tokyo: Kosei, 1975), p. 370.

9. Niwano, *Sha byō mu i*, 10.

10. *Ibid.*, 6.

to all living beings, who like the wool sustain us,” are “the starting point as well as the culmination of faith.”¹¹ Through *sūtra* recitation, we can change our own way of thinking from the assumption that we ourselves are living our lives to the acknowledgment that our lives come from the Buddha, and that the Buddha supports our lives. Once we do so, we can all feel grateful for life itself. Then naturally we can express our gratitude to the Buddha, the ancestors, and all things that support our life. It could be said that this is a condition of revealing the Buddha-nature that dwells within us all.

Sūtra Recitation for Revealing Buddha-nature

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, bodhisattva practice is an expression of the Buddha’s compassion. Let me mention the relationship between *sūtra* recitation and bodhisattva practice. The bodhisattva “has a great will to save others,”¹² based on understanding true salvation, namely, that one’s own salvation will be realized only through saving others. The bodhisattva practices are the “many and varied practices leading to the Buddha’s enlightenment.”¹³ Bodhisattvas think of others first, surrendering themselves to save others.

Sūtra recitation is the practice of revealing our gratitude to the Buddha, the ancestors and all things that support our lives by offering our time and our bodies. Through its practice, we pray for the happiness of those who are closely connected with us and pray for the liberation of those who are suffering. At the end of the practice, members of RKK recite a phrase from Chapter 7 of the

Lotus Sūtra: “May these blessings extend to all, that we with all the living together attain the Buddha way.” This is a prayer that we will try to attain the level of enlightenment of the Buddha and shall become happy together, all receiving the merits from the recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. This is a prayer of the bodhisattva. *Sūtra* recitation is abandoning one’s small self to express gratitude to all and to pray as a bodhisattva. Therefore, it could be said that *sūtra* recitation is a kind of bodhisattva practice.

The founder said that “bodhisattva practice originates with revering others, that is, with our recognizing the Buddha-nature of all people.”¹⁴ And he continued that “to discover and respect others’ Buddha-nature is indeed the primary object of the bodhisattva practice. Living Buddhism consists of this.”¹⁵ There is a model of this practice in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is “Never Disrespectful Bodhisattva” who appears in Chapter 20.

There are three key points in the practice of this bodhisattva. The first is that “to practice thoroughly even only a single kind of good deed is indeed sacred, and to do so is the first step toward salvation.” The second is that “the creation of a valid human life consists in our practice of even only a single kind of good deed with devotion and earnest perseverance.” The third point is that “bodhisattva practice originates with our recognizing the Buddha-nature of all people. If we try to save others without recognizing their Buddha-nature, we only perform formal but empty deeds.”¹⁶

Based on these three points, it can be said that if we thoroughly do the practice of *sūtra* recitation in which we devote ourselves to the Buddha, the ancestors and all things that support our lives, this

11. Ibid., 7.

12. Niwano, *Buddhism for Today*, p. 378.

13. Ibid., p. 14.

14. Ibid., pp. 309–310.

15. Ibid., p. 311.

16. Ibid., pp. 309–310 (for all three quotations in this paragraph).

practice will become a way toward liberation. We can also say that this practice will create our future lives, in other words we will become men or women who have the intention to liberate both self and others together. Moreover, through the practice of *sūtra* recitation, we will be able to cultivate our heart and mind to revere more deeply the Buddha, the ancestors, and other people. The more we do this practice in our actual life, the more deeply it will go into our heart and mind, the more our mind and heart will correspond with the Buddha's true intention, that is, the practice of revering the Buddha-nature of self and others.

Thus, this practice makes us really understand that the Buddha always wishes happiness for all of us. This is an important stage in our true liberation. This realization is the same as realizing that "I am the man or the woman whose Buddha-nature is revered by the Buddha who supports my life." In fact, it is RKK's mission to make many people who have consciousness have an awareness of the Buddha's true intention. These are merits stemming from the teaching of Never Disrespectful Bodhisattva. These merits make clear also that *sūtra* recitation itself is a practice for becoming aware of our own Buddha-nature.

Conclusion: From the Founder's Ordinary Practice

The founder was a man who sincerely continued the practice of *sūtra* recitation that is the fundamental practice of revering the Buddha-nature. Actually he said, "Since I do the practice of *sūtra* recitation every day, if I do not it, I feel bad. For starting a day, it is important to do the practice with calm mind in the morning."¹⁷ It is a fact that the founder thoroughly did this precious practice

every morning and evening. Thus it could be said that the recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra* sitting before the family altar would be a basic practice for those who have the desire to reveal the Buddha-nature of self and others, to do bodhisattva practice, and to realize a peaceful and harmonious world. Through this practice, we can feel that the Buddha will be always near to us, and so we are able to have this feeling all day. Although *sūtra* recitation is a small and simple practice, the potential benefit and the merit derived from this practice are immeasurable. The founder showed this in his attitude toward this practice throughout his life.

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17. Nikkyō Niwano, *Niwano Nikkyō hōwa senshū 4* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1980), p. 117.