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February 2024 Newsletter

Hello Everyone!

I hope that you are well, and that you are making sure to take care of yourself during this change in the Winter season!

By the time that you read this we will have successfully and collectively completed our 2024 Annual Midwinter Sutra Recitation Practice.

In fact, a month has already quickly passed in the New Year, and the Midwinter Sutra Recitation was a wonderful time for each of us to renew our individual vows and to refocus on those things that are most important in life.

Indeed, the Midwinter Sutra Recitation holds significance when we look at the very word “February itself. Interestingly, the word February comes from the Roman festival of purification called Februa, during which people were ritually washed.

So, in our own sense the Midwinter Sutra Recitation practice was a chance to ritually wash our hearts and minds so that we can better conduct our daily affairs this month with (i) a mind of reverence for the sacredness of all life and (ii) a burning desire to improve ourselves so that we can best recognize this sacredness.

If we think about it, if we each begin with a mind of reverence and reflection, we are in a far better place to emotionally deal with ongoing problems such as the wars in the Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as the humanitarian concerns centered on the increasing levels of asylum seekers entering the United States.

And of course, while we all are praying that these various problems are quickly resolved, we are mindful that, in human terms, this unfortunately might not be possible.

Despite these realities, it is nevertheless clear, by having the right mindset in the beginning, and by revering the Buddha Nature of others, we are individually and collectively in a better position to improve ourselves and the society at large.

This is why by having the proper starting mindset of “Itai Doshin,” many in body, one in spirit, it becomes more than a clever catch phrase, but rather, a call to diligent Bodhisattva practice to change our destiny.

For by sincerely practicing with a true sense of reverence for all life, with Itai Doshin as our internal guide, we can take on the happiness and sadness of others as our own, and thereby revolutionize our life and outlook for the better.

Tellingly Reverend Hatakeyama essentially pointed this out in his final full newsletter of November 2023 when he stated the following:

Shakyamuni Buddha, after his renunciation, endured six years of intense austerities and ultimately achieved supreme perfect awakening, a state previously unattained by any human. In the analogy of a great river, he successfully crossed from this shore (of normal human life) to the other shore (of enlightenment).

However, despite reaching the other shore, Shakyamuni Buddha did not remain there but returned to this shore. With compassion, he extended a helping hand to those who were suffering and filled with anxiety and continuously sought ways to guide them to the peaceful other shore.

The story teaches us something deeply significant about Mahayana Buddhism.

Rather than simply achieving personal enlightenment, crossing to the other shore, to be content spending peaceful time alone, it emphasizes returning to this shore for the sake of those who have not yet crossed, encouraging collective efforts so that all people can cross over to reach the other shore.

Reverend Hatakeyama was compassionately showing us through his guidance, that we are in fact, when starting out with the proper mindset of reverence, and acting in accordance with that reverence, behaving precisely as the Buddha did.

For this is what we as Bodhisattvas vow to do when we acknowledge the appropriateness of Itai Doshin, with a mind of reverence for others, and sincerely reflect on ourselves.

President Niwano also noted this in his recent guidance when he cited Zen master Reirin Yamada (1889-1979) regarding his feelings on the late the Soto Zen Patriarch, Dogen when he said:

No matter what Zen master Dogen saw or heard, he felt as though it were he himself, who did it . . . What we call ‘other people,’ Dogen called ‘the self of others.’ While other people were still other people, he felt as though they were also his self and therefore, their joy was the joy his own self and their sadness, and the sadness of his own self”. Yamada called this “the true way of life for human beings.” (President Nichiko Niwano’s January Monthly Guidance 2024)

This is powerful guidance from the President Niwano because it shows that if we continue in our practice that we too can behave in the true way of life for human beings.

That is, the problems that I mentioned at the beginning such war and population displacement are not beyond our ability to impact, for we can, when we have reverence for others, and reflect ourselves, reveal the true limitless potential of a people united in harmony with all life.

I think that as we further reflect on the month of February and how to best continue to refresh our hearts, and minds that we keep President Niwano’s guidance on Dogen at the forefront of our thinking for it is from here that we can faithfully fulfill our dreams and hopes for our families, communities, our nation and our world.

Thank you so very much for your time!

Wishing you the very best always

Gassho

Rev. James Hiroshi Lynch

Minister RKNY

