The Divine Mission of Rissho Kosei-kai

seen from the publication of the English Translation of

“The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law”

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The acquisition of the English translation of the Lotus Sutra

Soon after Rissho Kosei-kai was established in 1938, there was a revelation given to Co-founder Myoko Naganuma with a ‘Divine Instruction’: “the Lotus Sutra will be disseminated far and wide over the world with Rissho Kosei-kai as the source.” Even Founder Nikkyo Niwano, who was the president at that time, doubted this Divine Instruction. It seemed too remarkable to him that, with many excellent Buddhist scholars and priests who are familiar with the Lotus Sutra, Rissho Kosei-kai would bear such a large role in disseminating this Dharma to the world. The founder felt that nobody would believe this Divine Instruction based on the limited power and size of Rissho Kosei-kai at that time. But as time went by he began to understand Rissho Kosei-kai could manifest this reality.

The founder decided even though there are many Buddhist scholars and priests who are familiar with the Lotus Sutra, their interest may not be in using this knowledge to liberate the people. He also determined that even if we are lay Buddhist, we can disseminate the teachings of the Buddha if we study the Lotus Sutra diligently and understand its meaning.

The founder, shaping his thoughts in this way, worked harder to share the teachings of Rissho Kosei-kai with the Co-founder, Mrs. Myoko. Together they developed comprehensive practices for use both inside and outside of the church. Over time because of their dedication and outreach the church grew into the worldwide organization as it is today.
It was July 21 of 1959 that I became a staff member of Rissho Kosei-kai. I frequently thought about the Divine Instruction given to the founder. If this Divine Instruction should come to realization, the English translation of our main scripture, “the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law” written Chinese, would eventually reach publication. At that time I would not have known that I would be involved in its publication a few years later.

Up until now, the most famous English translation of the Lotus Sutra was the so-called Kern’s version which was translated from the Nepalese Sanskrit into English by a Dutchman, Dr. Heinrich Kern in 1884. But the English version that was translated from Chinese had not been published. Rissho Kosei-kai members had waited for this for a long time. In June of 1967, we succeeded in getting the draft of the 28 chapters of the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law. Following is the discourse of how Rissho Kosei-kai was able to obtain the draft of the sutra that was translated into English from Chinese by Rev. Bunno Kato.

At the end of May of 1967 I was director of Translation Section for Kosei Publishing Company. One day I visited the secretary’s office on the 7th floor of the Great Sacred Hall to meet my superior director, Rev. Kinzo Takemura, who was the managing director of the publishing department and a secretary to the President. After finishing my business Rev. Takemura asked me if I knew the Hokekyo Bunka Kenkyusho (the Cultural Research Institute for the Lotus Sutra). I replied that I had heard of the name. I said that it was located at Rissho University and the director was Rev. Yukio Sakamoto who was a professor there. Rev. Takemura informed me that when the Institute first started, President Nikkyo Niwano donated three million yen to fund its establishment. Prof. Sakamoto offered to do something for us as a token of his gratitude. At that time the Institute was poorly funded and Secretary Takemura couldn’t imagine anything that would be of use to our
organization. I expressed my excitement and told him about the draft of The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law, 28 Chapters that was translated into English by Rev. Bunno Kato. Now was the perfect time to ask for a copy of the English version draft of the Lotus Sutra, since they wanted to show us their gratitude! Secretary Takemura agreed with my request and the wheels were set in motion.

A few days later, I got a phone call from Secretary Takemura. He told me that Prof. Sakamoto accepted our proposal, and requested that I meet with him. I visited him at Rissho University on the appointed day and received the English translation draft of the Sutra.

At that time, Prof. Sakamoto said that as Rissho Kosei-kai would soon publish this draft, he had two requests to ask. The first was to clearly mention in the book that the translator had been Rev. Bunno Kato, the second was to state in the book that publication of this book was realized by the kind intention of Rissho University. As the conditions that Prof. Sakamoto offered were quite reasonable, I agreed immediately and brought the English version draft to my office. The experience was an emotional one. I remember clearly even now how I gently cradled the copy in a wrapping cloth as I rode back to my office in a taxi.

As I contemplate the course of acquisition of the English translation draft of the Lotus Sutra I remember the ‘Divine Instruction’ given at the beginning of Rissho Kosei-kai, and cannot help feeling the deep will of the Buddha in action.

In 1973 I was transferred to the International Affairs Section in the headquarters, and then in 1982 I went to serve as secretary to the founder. One day, as I accompanied the founder on his daily walk, he told me the following:

“The other day I heard your description of the acquisition of Rev. Bunno Kato’s translation of the Lotus Sutra. Hearing the story, it was clear to me that Rissho Kosei-kai is an organization born with a Divine Destiny. When the Cultural Research Institute for the Lotus Sutra was established, Prof. Sakamoto came to me and asked for financial help, so I pledged three million yen. At that time, I handed him a memo with a list of donators including the names and sum (this much from
Kubo san of the Reiyu-kai, this much from Miyamoto san of the Myochi-kai and this much from Iijima san of the Shishin-kai).

Later I received a letter of thanks from Prof. Sakamoto explaining that on my advice he visited each Lotus Sutra organization and not only received the amount of money pledged in the memo but was able to collect more than he expected, so the Institute was established ahead of schedule. I guess Prof. Sakamoto was always of the mind to express his gratitude to Rissho Kosei-kai. This is why he willingly accepted your proposal to give Kosei-kai the English translation of the Lotus Sutra by Rev. Bunno Kato. I really thought we should do good things whenever we have the opportunity.”

Stopping from time to time on our walk, I clearly remember founder’s face as he intently discussed our mission in spreading the teaching of the Lotus Sutra: “Just as in ‘Having acquired an inestimable jewel, without seeking’ from Chapter Four, ‘Faith Discernment’, of the Lotus Sutra. Rissho Kosei-kai has acquired an inestimable jewel in the English translation of The Lotus Sutra. From now on, as in the Divine Instruction, we must endeavor to disseminate the Lotus Sutra far and wide over the world.”

**The publication of English translation of the Lotus Sutra**

Thanks to the kindness of Prof. Yukio Sakamoto (Buddhist name: Nichijin) of the Cultural Research Institute for the Lotus Sutra, after Rissho Kosei-kai acquired the draft of the Lotus Sutra in English, the Sutra Translation Committee did extensive comparative examination between the original Japanese Heirakuji-edition of the Lotus Sutra and the English translation. Dr. Wilhelm Schiffer, director of the International Institute for the Study of Religions, Tokyo, and Prof. Yoshiro Tamura of Toyo University joined this project at our request.

After careful preparation, Kosei Publishing Company published the English version titled The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law
on March 10th, 1971. The photo that we used for the jacket cover design was the lotus flowers shot at the pond of Tsurugaoka-Hachimangu Shrine in Kamakura. Its publication received wide acclaim both inside and outside of Japan. The Yomiuri News Paper introduced this topic with caption “English version, Myoho-Renge-Kyo, publication 50 years after its translation,” and the following is the article in the news:

“One of the most important Sutras, Myoho-Renge-Kyo, the English version: The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law, was published for the first time by Kosei Publishing Company. The first English version of the Lotus Sutra was translated directly from Sanskrit. Publication of an English version translated from Chinese is, therefore, attracting much attention from scholars, researchers on Buddhism and Oriental Studies, and others who expect great academic contributions from it.”

The first printing of this English version was for 1,000 copies, and most of them were presented to religious scholars, researchers on the Orient, university institutes and libraries in the U.S.A., Europe, and Japan. Some were also sold to ordinary people through bookshops such as Kinokuniya and Maruzen in Tokyo (think Barnes & Noble or Borders). The unit price at the time was 3,500 Yen or about $12.

This book received “the Seventh Japan Translation Publishing Culture Award” on December 11, 1971. Although the English version of the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law was published, we did not know anything about the translator Rev. Bunno Kato except that he was a scholarly priest of the Nichiren Sect and already passed away.

About one month after the publication was completed, I received information about the surviving family members of Rev. Bunno Kato from Rev. Chido Takeda, professor at Rissho University. He had known about Rissho Kosei-kai through frequent visits to the International Institute for the Study of Religions. Rev. Takeda gave me the contact information for Rev. Shoko Seki, chief priest of Takanawa Jokyoji Temple and assistant principal of Rissho High School. I telephoned Rev. Seki who informed me that Umeko, wife of Rev. Bunno Kato, was still alive and well despite her
age of eighty-five. She was living with her second daughter, Mrs. Kaname Ohkubo in Ohtaki-machi, Isumi-gun, in Chiba Prefecture.

I wrote a letter to her telling of the publication. Because this had been a long time dream of Rev. Kato, I told her I wanted to bring three copies of the new book to offer to his memorial tablet. I soon received a letter that began with these words, “Your letter is much unexpected, and I really don’t know how to express my gratitude.” I noticed many blurs in the letter, so I could not read some of the words. She explained the reason in the letter: “Writing this letter, I could not stop crying with joy, so my tears fell on the letter making it blurry.”

At last, I visited the Myofukuji Temple of the Nichiren Sect to meet Mrs. Umeko Kato on the designated day. When I met her, I took out a new book, saying, “This is the English version of The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law that your husband wished to have published.” She remarked on the mysterious fate of her late husband’s effort: “I have waited for your coming; it was an eternity for me.” Saying so, she bowed her head deeply.

Then Mrs. Kato hugged the new book into her chest with tears and said: “I've got a very good present for my husband who is in the other world. Please convey my best appreciation to President Nikkyo Niwano. I’m going to offer this book to his memorial tablet.” The widow took the new book to the main temple. Soon she returned to tell the history and achievement of Rev. Bunno Kato, as follows:

He was born in 1888 as the eldest son of Rev. Bunga Kato who was the chief priest of the Ikegami-Minaminoin Temple. His father, Bunga, was well known as a scholarly priest in the Nichiren Sect. The elder Rev. Kato had a talent for writing and he edited and published the Writings of Nichiren in the Meiji era.

Bunno Kato left his parents soon after he finished elementary school and was sent to his father’s close friend, Rev. Yogen Fuse, as a live-in apprentice. There he attended Azabu Junior High School and then he went on to the Second Senior High School in Sendai under the prewar education system.
After graduation from the senior high school he entered into the Department of Religion at Tokyo University where he studied under Dr. Masaharu Anezaki. Dr. Anezaki was an eminent religious scholar representing the three generations, Meiji, Taisho and Showa eras. He was famous as the author of the book written in English, Nichiren: the Buddhist Prophet, and introduced the true value of the Lotus Sutra and the greatness of Saint Nichiren to the world.

It is said that Rev. Kato already wished to translate the Lotus Sutra into English, partly because of Dr. Anezaki’s influence. He graduated from Tokyo University in 1913 and helped in editing the Sect Magazine, Nisshu Shimpo, which his father published, while endeavoring to study the doctrine of the Nichiren Sect.

In 1922, he was one of the first groups of students chosen by the Sect, to be sent abroad. He went to England to study at Oxford University. Here he studied under Prof. W. E. Soothill who was an authority of Sinology. With his cooperation Rev. Kato started translating the Lotus Sutra into English. Though his father had strongly recommended that he translate the Writings of Nichiren, he chose the Lotus Sutra because of his deep desire dating back to his university days.

During his study in England, he completed the English translation of the Sutra in three years. He came back to Japan in 1925 and he was inaugurated as the secretary to Rev. Nisshin Sakai, head priest of the Ikegami-Honmonji Temple. He also assumed a position as lecturer at Rissho University. Later, he was assigned the position of managing director of the Doctrinal Department of Administrative Affairs Bureau, a division in the Nichiren Sect. With a promising future he was the hope of those around him.

During this period, Rev. Kato tried to publish his English translation but he could not find a good prospect. The book was very special and publishing it was very expensive. In the meantime, Prof. W. E. Soothill published a book, extracted partly from Rev. Bunno Kato’s translation but the distribution was limited to a small number of copies.
In 1934, at the age of forty-seven, Rev. Kato died after a chronic struggle with tuberculosis. He died without fulfilling his dream to publish it. Upon advice, his widow, Umeko, donated the draft of her husband’s translation to the Rissho University. The publication was discussed several times at Rissho University but there was no follow through. The draft lay inactive in the library of Rissho University for thirty-five years.

In June of 1967, Rissho Kosei-kai was allowed to publish the English translation of the Lotus Sutra. By chance, Prof. Nichijin Sakamoto, director of the Cultural Research Institute for the Lotus Sutra of Rissho University (president of Rissho University: April 1968 – March 1991) facilitated this special arrangement.

With the cooperation of Dr. Wilhelm Schiffer, who was professor at Sophia University, and director of the International Institute for the Study of Religions, and Prof. Yoshiro Tamura of Tokyo University, the preparation for the publication proceeded and, at last, the English translation of the Lotus Sutra by Rev. Bunno Kato came out to the world.

Though forty-six years had passed since Rev. Kato completed the translation of the Lotus Sutra at Oxford University, the publication came to a reality, and those people who were connected to this project were deeply impressed by “the Buddha’s profound connection” that Rissho Kosei-kai did the publication of the English translation of our main scripture. There is no doubt that the publication of English version of the Lotus Sutra has played a big role in the overseas Dharma work and the academic study of Buddhism.

It is often said in Japan "A person is mortal; a person’s name is immortal.” The name of Rev. Bunno Kato will remain for a very long time as the translator of the English version of the Lotus Sutra. The founder highly regarded this achievement and gave him a posthumous name that was enshrined on the memorial book in Eijuden Hall in the Great Sacred Hall of Rissho Kosei-kai so that he has been receiving prayers every morning and night from senior members.
His departed spirit is now sleeping quietly in the graveyard of the Ikegami-Honmonji Temple. After the publication of the English translation, I visited his grave on behalf of Rissho Kosei-kai.

As I reflect back on how this story has unfolded I remain in awe. I applaud this outstanding achievement and believe that Rissho Kosei-kai must have been destined to accomplish it. And it is my conviction that because of the given divine mission of Rissho Kosei-kai as disclosed at the beginning of its history, all the sincere efforts we Rissho Kosei-kai had made have led to this wonderful achievement.

The publication of English version of the opening and closing sutras

Rissho Kosei-kai is the lay Buddhist Organization who keeps the Threefold Lotus Sutra as our main scripture. Consequently, right after the publication of the English translation of the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law, the preparation for the publication of the English version of the opening and closing sutras proceeded quickly.

Since ancient times the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings was popularly known as the opening sutra of the Lotus Sutra, and the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal-Virtue, the closing sutra. It has been said that these two sutras cannot be separated from the Lotus Sutra.

Around June of 1971, Prof. Yoshiro Tamura of Tokyo University completed the English translation of the opening sutra. The draft was sent to Dr. Wilhelm Schiffer, professor at Sophia University for proofreading. I then asked Prof. Tamura to translate the closing sutra many times without success. A persistent request to expedite the translation came from the Sales Division director of Kosei Publishing Company who had already
advertised in bookstores the English versions of the opening and closing sutras.

Still I was not able to get a reply. I was at quite a loss. Then, what I decided, as a last resort, was that I would translate the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal-Virtue on behalf of Prof. Tamura. Upon completion, he would check and correct the draft and would publish the English version as the work of Prof. Tamura.

Once I got the idea, I started the English translation right away. By consulting the translation done by Rev. Bunno Kato, I started to translate the closing sutra. Because of the magnitude of the responsibility, I had difficulty making good progress, only a half page per a day at best.

From ancient times, it is often said when a sculptor of Buddhist images carves the image of Buddha ‘three times worship and one time chisel.’ It means, whenever a sculptor uses a chisel, he or she bows three times, before he or she uses the chisel every time. I tried hard to have the same mind as the sculptor as I translated the sutra, praying before one letter, one phrase. I translated the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal-Virtue into English devotedly day and night. The English translation was completed after thirty-three days. Finally!

Since Dr. Wilhelm Schiffer, professor at Sophia University, had unexpectedly passed away because of heart attack in Germany, we asked Prof. Pier P. Del Campana, also at Sophia University and a best friend of Dr. Schiffer, to do the proofreading of the closing sutra. Although Prof. Pier P. Del Campana was Italian, he studied abroad at Chicago University in the U.S.A. and got a PhD. where he chose the Writings of Nichiren for his thesis and was familiar with the Lotus Sutra.

Prof. Yoshiro Tamura of Tokyo University, Prof. Pier P. Del Campana at Sophia University, Miss Suzanne Trumbull of the Weatherhill Publishing Company and I did the final check of the English draft after the proofreading of the opening and closing sutras. Then Prof. Yoshiro Tamura strongly recommended that I accept credit by putting my name as the translator of the closing sutra. I accepted the proposal.
Two years later, on June 5, 1974, the opening and closing sutras were published in English as one book. It is this book: Muryogi-kyo and Kanfugen-gyo (The Sutra of Innumerable Meanings and The Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal-Virtue.)

The jacket cover was designed based on the opening and closing sutras part of the ‘Semmen Hoke-kyo (the Lotus Sutra on fans) which was made in the twelfth century. By publishing the English version of these two sutras, all the sutras of the main scripture of Rissho Kosei-kai are now available to the world. This was the first Chinese to English translation and it evoked an overwhelming response in Japan and abroad. Following the rapid overseas expansion of Japanese Buddhism, interests in translating the scriptures of Buddhism into foreign languages were high. It was quite joyful for those of us involved in this publication to receive the evaluation of the timeliness of the publication.

In 1975, the English version of the Threefold Lotus Sutra, which combined the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law published earlier, the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings and the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal-Virtue, was published as one book from the Weatherhill and Kosei Publishing Companies. This book was awarded “the Sixth International Publication Culture Award” on June 11, 1976.

In the year of 1976, I made a business trip to Hawaii. Rev. Nobutoshi Masuda, head of Rissho Kosei-kai Hawaii Church, guided me by chance the Book Center in Honolulu. I was deeply moved by seeing the book, THE THREEFOLD LOTUS SUTRA on a bookshelf of this bookstore.