
Koichi Kawamoto

Solving family problems in community: the *Hoza* session of Risho Kosei Kai

Risho Kosei Kai (RK) is one of the new religious groups founded in the post-war Japan. RK is a unique lay Buddhist movement which was founded by the late ex-president Nikkyo Niwano in Japan in 1938. The key of the growth of RK movement is called *hoza*: a kind of dialogue circle, under a leader with teachings of Buddhism, which takes place daily at the branches of the movement or at the believers' home.

In earlier times there existed a meeting, *uposatha* (p.) at which the monks (*bhiksu*, *bhikkusuni*) confessed, if they have failed to practice the teaching and they openly repented the false conduct which they discovered through self-examination. Such meetings were held several times monthly. This self-examination had important meaning in keeping the groups (*samgha*).

Hoza is a practice which helps keeping the Shakyamuni's teaching alive. The term 'ho' in Japanese means 'dharma' in Buddhism, teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni, and the meaning of 'za' is 'sit' or 'seat'. I will try to present here an analysis of *hoza* in several points.¹ Practically, I will talk about its organization, leadership, dynamism and contents.

1. Organization

The principle of the organization of *hoza* is its members' relationship. Their relation depends on a group which has its roots in person-to-person relationship. The number of the *hoza* participants is composed of five or eight, but it may vary depending on the circumstances. Sometimes, a big circle, like 30 ~ 50 people will be also called *Hoza*.

Usually these circles are formed according to the geographical areas. Geographical basis gives to the participants common problems and experience. *Hoza* sessions are held in branches of RK and RK members' home: in the afternoon for housewives, and in the evening for the youth and men.

In the teaching of Buddhism the believers occupy very important place, because the first part in the recitation of the prayer begins from the veneration to Buddha, Law (*Dharma*), and believers (*Samgha*). This veneration is fundamental, but the veneration to believers is the most important comparing to the other two, Buddha and Dharma. This is confirmed by the ancient sacred books of Buddhism.

A special characteristic of members is the position of women. Actually, there are many women among the members of RK. The majority of the members in *hoza* is middle-aged women. Traditionally in earlier times the position of women in Japan was low in the social hierarchy and tied mostly to the domestic works.

¹ Cf. K. J. Dale, *Circle of Harmony*, Tokyo, Seibunsha, 1975.

2. Leadership and posture of leaders

In *hoza* there is a leader who guides the participants. People obey that leader. If there is no confidence in this leader, it is difficult to manage the group and to tell its members the teaching of Buddha. It needs an ability of guiding the people, a so-called leadership, and sometimes, it might need charismatic personal qualities of the leader.

So the *hoza* leader will be seen like a teacher. But in RK these leaders are not professional teachers with academic qualifications. *Hoza* leaders are not academic experts, neither they are monks, but common people. They are laymen and laywomen, the majority of women is housewives.

The leaders manage *hoza* following the teachings of Buddha and try to give the concrete practical advice regarding the members' attitude and activities. For the leaders it needs an insight of situation and problem. To get a clear vision of possible options for solving their problem, they have to manage the process, according to the teaching of Buddha.

The posture of leaders must follow the posture as Buddha. The *hoza* leaders try to maintain a serious, warm and compassionate atmosphere. It needs wisdom and compassion of the leader in his efforts to save the individual by all means.

3. Dynamic process as therapy²

The members know each other well, therefore it is very easy to enter the conversation. In the organization of RK, the branches make their own *hoza* groups. The interest of the area or regional problems becomes a common interest. Daytime the majority of *hoza* session is housewives, so, the topic of the conversation tends to the family relations and education. This rapport is essential to therapy. Actually, many members come to *hoza* because of meeting and talking with friends. But the rapport between the persons remains particularly essential.

When the new individual comes to the *hoza* group, other members will accept him and they usually show towards that new individual such attitude as if he was their friend long before. Surely, the *hoza* leader expresses his spontaneous and cordial welcome. When the new individual arrives the *hoza* group will be closer, and the members will try to express their feelings. People bring their problems and their experience will be accepted among the members. This acceptance of the others and their experiences goes to the process of the solution. In order to reach the solution all the members try to keep the relations between themselves.

In the *hoza*, the individual, who has problems, expresses his burdens, emotions and problems of family relations. The *hoza* leader and members listen sincerely and tell him honestly their opinions, share with him their own experience. There is no rule of

² Dale indicates the Group Therapy as consisting in the following points: environment, rapport, acceptance, expression and insight. Cf. K. J. Dale, *Circle of Harmony*, Tokyo, Seibunsha, 1975, p.77-88.

expression, the expression is free. Similar burdens and problems increase intimacy between the members. The sympathy for the other makes atmosphere warmer, which makes it easy for the members to speak about their problems. On the other side, only a few expressions do not help the dynamism of conversation and the vigor of the members falls down. The spontaneous expression helps the *hoza* session. In this way the religious experience helps to support the people in their daily concerns and anxieties. In the last part, the individual gets the concrete practical advice for solving his problem. Until reaching the solution, the individual learns the fundamental thought to live under the understanding of the teaching of Buddhism. By learning the teachings he looks back to his life and his thoughts, he feels the necessity of changing it and decides to change it. The *hoza* session changes the personality radically comparing to the way the same person was before coming to the *hoza*. Changing the orientation of life, the value of the life and attitude of daily life are the scope of *hoza*. This insight is indispensable in order to lead the individual towards the solution.

4. Contents of *hoza*

4.1 Solving problem

The purpose of *hoza* is applying the teachings of Buddhism to everyday life. When there is a call for problem solving, we have to pay much attention to it. Because, in any case, solving problem is what the people need and it is skillful means to disseminate the teachings of Buddhism.³ The problem is solved in the light of the Buddhist Law. More particularly, it is important that their attitude is to be adjusted to a right watching, thinking etc.⁴

a) The nature of problems

Problems can be classified as: family, health, relationships with others, institutional maintenance, various misfortunes, and others. The problems of family are related to the relationship between husband and wife, wife and mother-in-law, parent and child, etc. The problems of health are dealing with physical disorders, medical diagnosis, mental disorders, etc. The problems in personal relationships are in offices, schools, among neighbors, etc. The problems of institutional maintenance relate to dissemination of Buddhist teachings and service responsibilities of RKK.

³ In RK this process is called *musubi*, which means “tying together”. Through *musubi* people tie their problems with the teaching of Buddha.

⁴ Eightfold Path and Six Perfections (Paramitas). The Eightfold Oath consists in right view, right thinking, right speech, right action, right living, right endeavor, right memory, and right meditation. The Six Perfections (or Paramitas) are donation, keeping the precepts, perseverance, assiduity, meditation, and wisdom.

b) The nature of the answer

Dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada, engi*)⁵ is the central doctrine of Buddhism. It teaches that everything results from the combination of causes and conditions (*innen*). All things have primary causes, these cause are conditioned by the moment and will result in the new birth to recompense the remains. In other words, present acts of individuals influence the next moment. The consequences of one's acts determine the future life. The effects are not only psychological but also physical. In short, the present effects are results of the past actions, and the present acts will influence the future causes. To understand the human problems requires looking back to the past acts and thoughts.

Buddha says that the human life is suffering. So the Buddhism teaches not eliminating the sufferings, but how to watch and to accept it. When people face the sufferings, usually they want to escape from it. But the teaching does not say escaping, but accepting the fact. The believers are strongly convinced that the evil situation is a good chance to promote themselves. The suffering is valuable.

The suffering is a good occasion to look back on himself and to do find out a better way in his life. Sufferings make the individual to examine himself. With this self-reflection he can clear the cause of his suffering.

To solve the problems Buddhist teachings demand the change of heart. To do that self-examination or introspection are necessary. It is at that stage that the individual repents, decides to change his/her mind and to act.

Buddhism requires the exhortation to submissiveness. The selfish mind and egoism disturbs the real mind. The humility is the first condition as virtue and the entrance to the solution. Actually, without flexibility the people can't listen to the words of *hoza* leader, who wants to work together with them towards the solution.

The believers will be thankful for the suffering, therefore, because through the suffering they can open their eyes to change of the heart. At the end of the *hoza* leader shows the concrete practical way for solving the problem, the individual expresses the intention to act and promises to do it. The faith in Buddha helps to encourage him to do it. The *hoza* members also encourage him warmly.

In short, the suffering is not changed, but the mind of the individual who experiences it changes in regard to how to receive the suffering and how to put up with it.

c) Significance of problem-solving in hoza

The theme of solving the problem is very subtle for the religious group, because this theme is not the main one for the religion. But for people solving their problems is the most urgent and primary one. Buddhism does not ignore the desire of the people, rather it makes them realizing that solving problems will be a good motivation to enter the Buddha way. The Buddhism does not deny the benefit (in J. *riyaku*), it rather thinks that is a natural effect. In the Lotus Sutra, a sacred book of the Mahayana Buddhism,

⁵ When that exists, this comes to be; on the arising of that, this arises. When that does not exist, this does not come to be; on the cessation of that, this ceases. (*Majjhima Nikaya* 1.262-264)

this benefit-granting will become a method to bring the individual to the right direction. It is called skillful means (*hoben*). It must be used to lead people to the position where people can think about the ultimate goal.

d) Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths is a process of solving the problems. The first Noble Truth is the presentation of a problem by a participant and the acknowledgement of the truth of suffering. In the second Noble Truth, the leader seeks the truth of cause in the background. The leader then urges the member to attain happiness, or nirvana, which is the third Noble Truth, by changing his ethical way of life according to the truth of path, the fourth Noble Truth.

It is very difficult to recognize the real problem. Sometimes the individual can not define what the suffering is. Usually the cause is not clear at first, so it takes some investigating. The solution is in repenting of one's covetousness. In any case, however, the role of *hoza* leader helps to guide the individual.

RK uses the Lotus Sutra to bring people toward the right way of life. Clearly the solution to a problem for an individual begins with the clear identification of that problem. Up to a point, an individual has a tendency to avoid the reality of the facts. Looking at the face of the problem is the first step to challenge toward finding the solution. After getting the evidence of suffering, the *hoza* leader can lead a follower to search for the cause. During that process the teaching of causes and effects is helpful.

4.2 Analysis of Instruction

From the contents of *hoza* conversations we can see the instruction in the doctrinal teachings of RK and Buddhism.

a) The Doctrine of Interdependence⁶

In Buddhism to "make yourself in light" (*attadipa; jitomyo*) is the first teaching, and it is rather famous as the last teaching of Buddha. It means, the main in the life is anybody's self. One has to act himself and to think about himself. Other people can not help him. Understanding of this teaching, teaching of interdependence is fundamental in the *hoza* session. The individual is connected with the others, not separating from them. Buddhism sees that all things are connected integrally by cause and effect in the time and space. The rapport with the others and the teaching of interdependence is a key to understand that the individual does not exist alone, but lives in relations with the people.

This teaching is expressed by teaching of the formula, Causation, *in-en-ka-ho* (in J.). This formula can be defined thus: *in* means primary cause (cause in past time); *en* means present condition or circumstances (secondary, cause); *ka* means result, and *ho* means recompense (reward or retribution for the result). In *hoza* conversations the

⁶ *Sarvadharmā anatmanah*, or Nothing has a Ego.

meaning of this basic concept is explained and made operative in everyday life.⁷ The *in-en-ka-ho* formula helps to analyze the problem, and to give a concrete practical advice for the everyday life.

b) The value of suffering

For RK members, the suffering is a valuable part of human experience. Because of it believers can focus on themselves and reflect their acts of daily life. And after they find their points of revision of mind and act, they try to apply them in their life ethically. This is the dynamics of life. If a person repents of the evil, he changes his way by feeling that his life is given by the great Life, his trouble will be the step to promote his life as a human being. In this meaning the suffering becomes valuable. The suffering is like an alarm-clock, which tells the necessary moment. So understanding and receiving properly the suffering is a guide to a better life. It is important that people are urged to recognize, that suffering basically has rather a positive than a negative function.

c) Concrete practice

In solving a problem, change of mind and change of behaviour are required. Knowledge of the teachings in our religion intellectually is important, but not the only one. The intention to put those teachings in practice is equally important.

Showing gratitude and honour to parents is the primary and the first virtue for RK members. If we have a problem with our child, we are required to do self-examination about our relationship with this child and our parents. In RKK, if we have a problem with other people, it means we do not have respect for their parents. We must be grateful to parents first of all, and then to everyone else.

This rule of individual ethics is constantly reminded in *hoza* teaching. The source of evil is in our selfish hearts. Members must try not to live just for their own selves, but always think of what is the best for their neighbours.

d) Veneration Ancestors

One of the concrete practices of RK members is the ancestor veneration, a concept deeply rooted in Japanese religious feeling. Exhortations towards the ancestors' veneration are a fundamental practice. If the ancestors did not exist, I could not exist here and now. From remembering them the people can feel the close connection with their ancestors and therefore, the importance of life. Without the existence of ancestors people can not exist. It needs however to emphasize that the veneration of ancestors is not the ultimate purpose, but a practice of the individual who is trying to follow the

⁷ It can be best explained by a metaphor. The primary cause is like a seed. The secondary cause is the environment in which the seed lives and it can be compared to the water and the heat for the seed. Effect is the fruit of the plant, the result of the interaction of primary and secondary causes. Recompense is the experience of reward or punishment, which arises in connection with the effect.

teaching of Buddha. So the veneration of ancestors is an expression of recognition to one's dependence on all that have gone before and an expression of grace for one's own existence.

4.3 Testimonies

If the individual, who has a problem, wants to find a solution, it would be enough to listen to the directions and to do what the *hoza* leader says. But it is not easy to do so for the people, who have a problem, because it is difficult to change their heart and acts of the daily life only by somebody's advice. Besides, it is difficult for the human beings to change their habits. To help the understanding of what the *hoza* leader says, the testimonies are indispensable. People can understand the advice theoretically, but it would be doubtful if they will obey the *hoza* leader. The good experiences and the imaginable phenomena, which were real effects of the practice can help to understand, what the *hoza* leader says and they would be provably certain. After hearing these experiences, people start to think of doing the practice emotionally.

On the other side, in Buddhism it is an ordinary thing that people get the effect after changing their mind and way of acting. The believers of Buddhism follow this teaching of interdependence in their everyday life. The central point of changing the mind is going out from the selfishness and stubbornness towards tolerance and flexibility.

In *hoza* the people can listen sometimes to the facts of physical healing. If non-believers think that such facts could be explained by the medical theory, it maybe so. But it is important to emphasize that this type of a narrative helps the people to enter the practice.

Conclusions

1. Circumstances

In my opinion, *hoza* sessions create an effective way to understand the essential teaching of Buddhism. Particularly for Japanese the association with others from the same age group or similar background gives a spiritual peace. The mutual or inter-personal relationships are important factors to sustain the community. This in turn, can give RK members the peace and security both, socially and psychologically. Through the *hoza* sessions the solidarity and consciousness among members grows strong. The acts of discussing similar problems may help to increase relationship and power.⁸

2. Effective leadership

A unique characteristic of *hoza* is its lay leadership. Leaders are not professional people; they may not be experts in the teaching of Buddhism. But they can guide people to solve their problems. RK is a lay Buddhist movement, so it is not strange to see lay

⁸ In this case, there are some questions: individual responsibilities and the private problem will be washed away.

people in the important and responsible positions, organizers, the keepers of the organizational structure. By the fact that the *hoza* leaders are lay people, members may feel the intimacy and are more willing to accept the teaching of Buddhism. The characteristic of lay leadership is more acceptable to the secular population.

Another characteristic of the lay leaders is that the practice indicated in *hoza* is not abstract, but concrete. The practice is ought to be concrete and realizable in everyday life. Lay leaders can explain the practice easily to the people, because they live at the same level of the society with the *hoza* members.

Obviously leaders must know well the teaching of Buddhism, but it is not required to have some academic qualification in that field. The powerful leadership can guide to results quickly and solve problems easily.⁹ Nevertheless, this process must be supported by the wisdom and compassion. The guidance to find the proper solution is not easy and it focuses strongly on the personality of each member.

3. Levels of personal need

The desires of physical and affective needs of individuals are strong. Many people enter the religious group to solve their problems. Some want to save the society and the world. The desires of people are concrete.

For RK members, the essence of these desires is to think how to guide others in the way of Buddhism. The real scope of Buddhism is to become Buddha. But it is difficult to achieve it. The Lotus Sutra shows how to lead people to walk the Buddha way, to satisfy their desires.

The happiness is different from pleasure. On the other hand, the danger exists in putting the emphasis on the benefits of religious faith rather than on the absolute worth of the object of faith. The value of happiness is not the same with the one of material benefits, but the material benefits will create a stage to reaching the goal. So that stage will be seen as a process of skilful means (*hoben*). In the *hoza* conversations arriving at the ultimate realization of Truth is sometimes difficult, but *hoza* must not forget the real goal of becoming Buddha.

⁹ There is a problem about the leadership: the danger of institutional authoritarianism. Nowadays, the strong leadership might be a threat to the rational, liberal and democratic direction. The guidance therefore of the individual and the realization of the practice would be compulsory, not spontaneous. Cf. K. J. Dale, *Circle of Harmony*, Tokyo, Seibunsha, 1975, p.157