

Reaching Beyond Her Limits
Minako Nakajima, Hawaii
By Joanne Tachibana, Honolulu

TO dance! To choreograph! To teach! This is the life that Minako Nakajima always dreamed of having. Growing up in Takarazuka City, Japan, world renowned for its Takarazuka Female Dance Troupe, one would naturally be influenced by the city's culture and arts. But imagine pulsating with such creative energy and being denied the opportunity to express it.

Minako's parents—her father a pharmacist and mother a homemaker—demanded a no-nonsense approach to life. Therefore, Minako could not share her dreams with her parents in such a strict and repressive setting where pursuing art was frowned upon and thought of as frivolous. Only when her parents were out of the house did she set free her innate desire to dance.

Minako recalls that from an early age, whenever she heard music she would imagine dance movements in her mind. She continued dreaming of being a dancer and a choreographer even as she disciplined herself in her studies at Catholic junior and senior high schools. Later when she was admitted to a prestigious college in Kyoto, she majored in oriental history and took a few dance classes as well.

Minako floundered for six months after graduating college in 1981. She tried studying under a master etcher, then moved on to apprentice with a pastry chef. She was searching for a career, all the while attempting to ignore her love for dance. Finally, she gave in to her dream, and made a decision to pursue a career in dance. She began taking dance classes in the neighboring cities of Osaka and Kobe. Immediately her talent was recognized and she was asked to assist with teaching and choreography.

One of her first major accomplishments was to choreograph a twenty-minute piece for a forty-student performance. Minako was elated with its success. However, after taking classes for two years, she was anxious to learn more. Coincidentally, a friend returned from Hawaii after a year of dance instruction under Betty Jones, who specializes in the Limon technique. This friend taught Minako what she had learned, which fueled Minako's desire to study with Betty Jones, also. So she applied to the Jones-Ludin Dance Center and was accepted on its exchange-visitor program.

Minako became part of Betty Jones' dance company, Dances We Dance, Inc., in the fall of 1983. Although she believed that the Limon technique brings out an individual's potential, it was not easy to learn; also, her teacher was very strict. Minako suffered many injuries to her ankles and knees and felt unable to progress.

At this time she met several SGI members in a beauty salon who befriended her and persistently invited her to discussion meetings. After two months of giving excuses, Minako finally agreed to participate. Meanwhile, she was heavily involved in rehearsals for her first major recital, The Spring Passages Choreographers Concert. She knew she had great potential, but was having a difficult time bringing out her best. She really wanted to be a great modern dance artist.

AT her first SGI meeting, a leader shared that this Buddhist practice helps individuals overcome limitations. Without hesitation, Minako latched on to this encouragement. With the recital only a week away, she began to chant with determination. Immediately, she said: "I noticed that I began enjoying my dance and strong emotions were coming out of my life. I even felt like smiling, and my body felt free and open."

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Keywords: Beyond Career Creativity Dancers Experiences Features Hawaii Honolulu Limits Reaching

The concert was a great success. Minako said, "I even received my first praise from my teacher who told me, 'Good job.'"

Two weeks later, she performed in another event, The Spring Passages Young Choreographers Concert. A local newspaper called that concert "stimulating," complimenting Minako on her "craft of composition and strong dancing." These she places among her first benefits due to her Buddhist practice.

Minako continued struggling during her first three years with the dance company, constantly challenging herself to master techniques and to open up her potential. The long hours of rehearsal drained her and more and more injuries plagued her, often making her walk home difficult. As soon as she arrived at her apartment, she would immediately chant to the Gohonzon for her well-being, pointing at her foot. Once, she had an ankle injury, but she continued to chant and was able to dance.

Her growth as a dancer and choreographer kept evolving. In the spring of 1986, Minako received her first Hawaii State Dance Council award for choreography for her creation, "Yume" (Dream). That summer she received a scholarship to the American Dance Festival (ADF) at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. The ADF is described as the cutting edge of dance. The *New York Times* calls it "one of the nation's most important institutions," and the *Durham Morning Herald* describes it as the mecca of modern dance, the number one festival in the dance world. Minako joined her teacher, Betty Jones, in North Carolina, and was also her assistant and translator for the ADF when it traveled to Japan.

Together with the dance company, Minako also traveled throughout Hawaii to participate in the Artists in School program.

Minako's performances received lavish comments from the local Hawaiian press. Her "fluidity of movement is an absolute joy to behold," said *Ka Leo O Hawai'i*. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* praised her, saying she "dances with splendid grace and power, her 'Dreamscape' is superb musicality"; and for her "Same Steps" piece: "Minako has astounding grace and fluidity of motion." She was awarded her second Hawaii State Dance Council choreographer's award for her 1989 piece, "Air of Prayer." Minako's original plan was to study with Betty Jones for only one year and return to Japan to teach dance. However, as she continued diligently in her Buddhist practice, her dreams grew bigger and bigger—she stayed in Hawaii and polished her skills as a choreographer, dancer and teacher for ten years, along the way receiving numerous scholarships and accolades.

In 1993, Minako resigned from the dance company to pursue her master's degree in dance at the University of Hawaii. She wanted to further her education and enhance her dance skills. At the university she was introduced to a variety of ethnic dances including those from the Philippines, Korea, Hawaii and Okinawa, which now greatly influences her choreography. Although Hawaii seems far removed from major dance movements, Minako has gained wide experience through the many scholarships awarded her, which gave her opportunities to work on large-scale productions and learn from nationally renowned choreographers.

The Hawaii State Dance Council awarded Minako her third award for choreography for "Sonata" in 1994. A project director described "Sonata" as "beautiful in its simplicity and passion." Furthermore, she complimented Minako: "Your performance is strong, refined and elegant. And it was a pleasure to watch your performance."

As SGI Culture Department Arts Division vice chief, Minako has worked on two public performances held at the SGI-USA Hawaii Culture Center. The first event,

which took place in 1994, was titled "Humanism in the Arts." It examined the relationship between humanism and the arts and society by focusing on Victor Hugo and the period in which he lived. For this occasion Minako choreographed and performed a piece to Chopin's music. Two years later the theme, "The Creative Spirit," was depicted through music, song, dance, poetry and artwork. Minako choreographed and performed "Lotus," which was accompanied by a Chinese koto, and "Moonlight," accompanied by a soprano and pianist. For her contributions to the culture and arts, she received an award from the Min-On Association.

Minako's growth in her Buddhist practice and in her responsibilities as an SGI-USA young women's vice joint territory leader has been reflected not only in her dance /choreography but also in her family revolution. She recalls that when she first joined she wanted a happy family with strong unity. At that time when she had returned home and informed her parents that she had joined the Soka Gakkai, they reacted in shock and dismay and did not speak to her for a week. Also, her brother, who lived away from home and was struggling through medical school, never communicated with the family. Today, her parents are very supportive of her practice, and her brother is a medical doctor and lives close to their parents. Even Minako's decision to pursue a dance career has met with their approval. After her first two years of study in Hawaii, she recalls she had returned to Japan and joined her friend in a joint public recital at the Osaka Theater. She danced while her friend sang and played the piano. Minako's parents had helped finance this endeavor.

In 1992, eight years after beginning her practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, Minako was praised by her mother. Her mother commented that she had seen Minako change and grow, and credited the Gakkai for the encouragement and training her daughter received. Minako recalls a leader sharing guidance that daimoku permeates the farthest corners of the universe. She witnessed the benefit of her practice extending to her family, especially during the great earthquake in Kobe in 1995, when her parents escaped injury despite half of their home being destroyed; not only that, the money her father had been saving for his membership fee to a very expensive golf club was used to renovate the house. Her mother is pleased because today, their home is more modern and comfortable than before.

Today, Minako is truly pursuing the "creative life" that SGI President Ikeda describes as "one that is devoted entirely to transcending the individual self by continually reaching beyond the limits of space and time in pursuit of the universal self" (*A New Humanism*, p. 8).

Minako will complete her master's degree in the spring of 1998. She looks forward to her parents attending her graduation ceremonies. Her master's thesis will be a performance using poetry with non-violent themes. After graduation she will continue her efforts in dance/choreography and teaching career and open her own dance studio. She also will continue doing community service with the Artists in Schools program to encourage children in their creative endeavors. □

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