

**ROBERTA TAIX, Biloxi, Miss.  
'I Have Already Won'**

Last April, around my 54th birthday, I found a lump in my right breast. For the next few weeks I didn't think much more about it. Then I realized that it was about the size of a marble. My mother and sister both have histories of liquid-filled, benign breast tumors. Was I now to have a similar history?

Spring became summer. My days were very full. Teresa, the owner of the salon where I work, went to Italy for two weeks. It was not a good time to find a doctor, but the lump was getting larger. I confided in my husband, Lucien (we've been married 22 years as of May 2!), about my problem and assured him there was nothing to be alarmed about. He has plenty of his own problems, being almost 10 years now with Parkinson's disease. I told myself as soon as Teresa was back at work that I would see a doctor.

Then total denial set in. After years of wanting to live on the Mississippi coast, finally Lucien and I were here and loving it. I was lucky enough to be hired at the salon, and my clientele was building steadily. Just when my life was going so well, I surely didn't need a distraction like breast surgery. Getting this far had been a long and difficult struggle, I told myself. I was not going to let everything unravel now. I knew I had gotten this far because of my Buddhist practice, and many times I chanted before the Gohonzon with deep appreciation.

Ironically, my oldest friend, from grade school on, was diagnosed with breast cancer a year ago. She had a mastectomy. When I was asked to teach a new member how to do gongyo, I used that opportunity as a cause for my friend's complete recovery. My friend is doing very well.

By mid-summer the lump in my breast was the size of a walnut. That's when Teresa's 8-year-old daughter was attacked by a pit bull and badly injured. Her recovery took a few weeks, so again I delayed getting medical attention.

Then it was late September and the lump seemed to be growing even faster. I was finding it more difficult to do hair because of pain in my right shoulder and arm.

Just when I knew I had to say something to Teresa and get to a doctor, her mother had a severe stroke. Two days later, her mother died, still in a coma. All these events allowed me to continue to deny that I had a serious problem. I viewed it as a small problem that would get taken care of eventually.

One day a new client came in for a haircut. He was a family practice doctor. Well, I thought, here's my doctor. Later that day, I took Teresa aside and said: "There is no good time to tell you this. I have a lump in my breast the size of Texas and I have to get something done about it."

She cried.

I explained to the doctor that I had no insurance and precious little money. He said that there was a breast cancer seminar soon at the local electric company that is held every October. Then he called the head of the radiology department at a local medical center. She arranged for me to get a free mammogram, and the doctor discounted his fee. Two definite benefits. That was the start of a medical odyssey that would drastically change my life.

When I met with the surgeon, Dr. Lee, he assured me that I was facing a mastectomy. I explained my financial circumstances. He said that he wanted me to see Susan Stevens in Social Services at the medical center. I left his office, stopped by the library, then went to meet Ms. Stevens. Dr. Lee was just coming out of Social Services as I was going in. Ms. Stevens told me, "In the 12 years I have been doing this, this is the first time a doctor has

come into my office and asked me to take care of a patient.”

The universe’s protective forces were certainly working for my benefit. All my medical expenses would be paid by Vocational Rehabilitation Services. This is a program for people who work, have no medical insurance, need medical intervention and plan to return to work. I hadn’t know the program existed.

A biopsy was done in Dr. Lee’s office. When I went to get the results, he said: “Well, it’s malignant. I thought it would be. Didn’t you?”

“No,” I replied.

He pointed to a calendar and said he could do the surgery this week but would be out of town that week. I barely heard him. Everything was a blur.

The surgery was scheduled, then postponed because the preoperative blood test showed high liver enzymes. Scans showed my bones were clear, but there was a large tumor on my liver. I was referred to an oncologist, Dr. Davidson.

I could have been consumed with negative thoughts and emotions, but the beloved Goshu came to my rescue. There is a quote from the Goshu that was constantly in my thoughts: “Now more than ever, you must neither show nor feel any fear” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 140).

By the time I walked into Dr. Davidson’s office, I knew I was facing death. My cancer was in what doctors call stage four — very aggressive and very advanced. “I’m knockin’ on death’s door,” I said simply, “and maybe you can help me postpone that.”

The doctor was leaning against the wall, arms crossed and a big grin on his face. I found out later that he was smiling at my acceptance of my illness. It meant any treatment would go that much better. I understood there was virtually no hope — I knew remission was unheard of, statistically, for a cancer as serious as mine. Dr. Davidson knew that understanding would help my recovery.

Strange things happen to a body receiving chemotherapy. The first two treatments didn’t work very well. By then the tumors were a lot bigger and getting painful. One place on my breast was about to ulcerate. Dr. Davidson called it an “angry place.”

That was when the puzzle pieces fell into place. It was exactly what the doctor had called it — it was anger coming out. I believe anger and fear are two sides of the same coin; defeating one means defeating both. I understood with clarity that I had been battling my environment for a very, very long time — as long as I could remember. Abusive relationships (until my Lucien came along)...well, just one thing after another. It took something as big as this illness to open my eyes.

Who said the unexamined life is not worth living? I now know what that means. And that’s what chanting is all about. Like SGI President Ikeda tells us constantly, we should look at our own lives. As the Daishonin writes, we should “observe our own minds.” For us lucky ones, a major illness forces us to examine our lives on every level.

Dr. Davidson also pointed out my “clean little heart.” So here I was with a clean little heart and an angry place on an aggressive tumor.

So I began to pray to the Gohonzon to change the poison of anger into medicine for my recovery.

The third chemo treatment I had was a different type, one made from the bark of the Pacific Yew tree. The response was dramatic. The first week, I experienced five days of bone pain, a side effect. But by the second week, the tumors were smaller by at least 30 percent. More good news came in the mail. Social Security approved my case for disability. Two huge benefits.

The drama goes on as I face an army of demons. But I don’t face it alone. So many people have called and sent cards and good wishes. My daughter goes with me for every chemo

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treatment. Mother came for two months from Oklahoma. At the salon, a client donated two Patti Bannister prints for a raffle; hundreds of dollars were raised for me. Friends and relatives have sent books and pajamas and money. Best of all, Buddhist friends in faith have been sending me daimoku, offering help, coming over to visit and calling to see how Lucien and I are doing. Every day I thank the Gohonzon for them.

When a friend went to Atlanta, she spoke with our women's division joint territory leader on my behalf. The leader said to stem my destructive fears. Fear and doubt can make us anxious and apprehensive. It is important to squelch fear, she said, and important to chant a lot.

I knew this meant that I had to pay attention daily and watch for negative emotions that could hold back my healing. I also understood that doubt (and consequently fear) could creep into anything — my confidence in my doctor, my confidence in my practice — absolutely anything. And to squelch fear and doubt does not mean to simply pretend I don't feel that way; it means to confront it and eradicate it.

Another friend put a card on my refrigerator that reads: "Believe in this mandala with your whole heart. Nam-myoho-range-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What illness can therefore be an obstacle?" (MW-1, 119).

I have been practicing this Buddhism since 1989, and it has been my greatest good fortune. I don't know what will happen in the future or where this is all going. I do know it will be whatever is best for my life. I have a mission here and now for kosen-rufu.

Statistics tell me about this type of cancer. The survival rate for five years is 20 percent. Not very good odds. But these figures are based on the past few decades. Dr. Davidson thinks remission, and I think *mission*. This is not an ending but a beginning. Now when I face my army of demons, I do so with an army of friends at my back.

I have already won.

**WT**