

**SAM HARRIS, ATLANTA**  
**My Obstacles**  
**Are My Treasures**

On Sept. 1 of this year, I will commemorate my 25th year of practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I've been reflecting on and assessing my quarter-century.

At the age of 19, while serving in the U.S. Army, I spent 12 months in Vietnam. Several close friends were killed in that war. After experiencing the ultimate human tragedy of war, it was very easy for me to connect with the Buddhist concept of kosen-rufu. I became a member and started practicing when I was 22.

Reading Nichiren Daishonin's Goshō, I was fascinated by various Buddhist concepts, especially karma and the ten worlds. Studying the Goshō helped me to understand that with persistence I could overcome anything. I noticed that all of Nichiren Daishonin's disciples, who followed his guidance when difficulties arose, were victors in the end. I also read SGI President Ikeda's guidance consistently with a seeking mind.

During my first year of practice, two events had a tremendous impact on my faith as a new member. First, I chanted for a particular job that I really wanted, and I did not get it. The job offered an excellent salary, great fringe benefits, a good location and the opportunity for advancement. I was given an exam, which I passed, and had a very successful interview. But after all was said and done, I did not get the job. I was devastated. I thought that Buddhism had no power.

The person who introduced me to Buddhism, Dori Scales, encouraged me: "Sam, if you sincerely chanted for the job and did not get it, there must be a reason. Please have confidence and continue chanting."

Although I was angry, somehow I trusted Dori and continued to chant. Two weeks later, I received a job offer that brought with it all the things that the other job offered, plus 30 percent more pay. Naturally, I took the job and was very happy. Six months later, I found out that the company I was interested in initially had gone bankrupt and was out of business. At that moment, I realized the power and protection of the Buddhist gods. The Gohonzon had protected me from myself! I was overjoyed and, of course, continued to practice.

The second event happened near the end of my first year of practice, my wife, Cynthia, decided to start practicing. When I asked her what moved her to practice, her response shocked me: "I see you becoming a better husband, a better father and a better person. If chanting can do that for you, then maybe I need to chant, too."

I had not chanted to become a better husband, father or person. I realized that practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism was benefiting my life in ways of which I was not even aware.

In March of 1974, I met President Ikeda for the first time in New Orleans. He gave a very interesting speech comparing the human body to the universe. I was fascinated by his words, but what impressed me most was that although there had been a table prepared on stage for him, he moved to the floor of the auditorium so that he could be closer to the members. I felt that this is a man I could follow and support. I knew I wanted to make him my mentor, and I determined that I would practice Buddhism for the rest of my life. President Ikeda named that gathering of members the Happiness Group.

At that time I was working at the Xerox Central Refurbishing Center. There were approximately 200 employees there. I began telling everyone about this great organization of which I was a part. I even told our plant manager. I was teased and criticized by many of my co-workers, but some of them gradually began practicing themselves and telling others.

As a result, some of them are still practicing and taking leadership responsibilities in our organization today, more than 20 years later.

Although I did not actively seek leadership responsibility in our organization, I began to assume more responsibility for more members. This gave me a strong sense of fulfillment. It also enabled me to grow and develop, and challenge my weaknesses. I enjoyed chanting, studying, propagating and showing victory on my job.

However, there was one problem that kept following me — financial difficulties. I had good health and a happy marriage, but I just couldn't seem to overcome my financial situation.

When I sought guidance from my seniors in faith about my financial situation, they explained to me about karma, saying: "Because of the negative causes you created in past lives, you suffer financial difficulties in this life. You must continue to practice so that you can overcome them." I continued to chant and challenge my financial karma.

In an effort to change my financial situation, I left my job at Xerox in 1981 to start my own business. The business failed in less than a year. My family and I experienced extreme financial difficulties. I decided to get back into the job market. But the country was in recession, and I couldn't seem to find a job anywhere. Our future looked hopeless. Things got so bad, I had to accept food stamps to feed my family.

I was a chapter leader at the time. Having no transportation, I had to ask various members for a ride to and from the community center. I could not afford to buy candles or incense for my altar. When the candles at the community center altar were used up and thrown out, I would get them and use them on my altar. Once, when a senior leader was visiting Atlanta, I remember dramatizing my financial situation by showing him the holes and cardboard in both of my shoes.

The frustration, humiliation and demoralization I felt at the time was tremendous. I hated to wake up each day and regain consciousness of my situation. I began to think, "Even if I find a job, I am so far under, I will never be able to overcome my situation."

My wife never complained during this time; she knew how badly I felt already. Instead, she continued to give me the warm encouragement and support I so desperately needed. The most painful part of this suffering was the fact that my family had to suffer with me.

I began to doubt my capability as a leader. I felt that if I could not manage my own affairs, how could I possibly lead the members? I met with my territory leader and told him I wanted to resign as a chapter leader because I was not worthy. He would not let me resign. Rather, he reminded me of why I began practicing Buddhism in the first place — to challenge my obstacles and change my life. I started chanting with a new sense of determination to win.

I still could not understand what causes I could have made in past lives that would cause me to suffer so severely in this life. What did I do to deserve this? Why me? Was I a mugger in my previous life? A burglar, a bank robber? What?

Then I came across a passage from President Ikeda on suffering and hardship. "Only if you have personally struggled and experienced hardships can you understand other people's hearts," he said. "Unless you go through difficulties, you cannot empathize with others' hardships. And if you are unable to understand others' struggles, you cannot be called a Buddhist leader."

This was the most important turning point in my practice. Because I could not see any connection between causes from past lives and hardships I was experiencing in this life, I always felt that I was just suffering to be suffering. This guidance gave my hardships a sense of purpose — this awareness gave me the strength I needed to persevere and win.

In February of 1983, I was hired by Konica Business Machines as a copier service

technician. I began the slow process of trying to build a financial foundation. I was so happy to finally have a job. I appreciated my job so much, I worked much harder than everyone else. In 1985, I was selected as the top technician nationwide, over 800 other technicians. I was gradually regaining my confidence and starting to feel good about myself again.

Another guidance from President Ikeda that I found to be very encouraging was: "There is no nobler way of life than dedicating yourselves to the widespread propagation of the Mystic Law. Irrespective of your nationality, circumstances or karma, if you believe in and practice in accord with the Mystic Law you will definitely become happy. There are no exceptions."

In March of 1995, I left my job to once again start my own business. Two years have passed, and the business is healthy and growing. In July of 1996, my wife quit her job to help me run the business. Before my wife left her job, we paid off all of her bills, and our business matched her previous salary.

In 1996, we received merger offers from two different companies. We turned them both down because we wanted to maintain our ability to call our own shots. Last year we had our house painted and electrically rewired, a new roof put on and the front and back yards landscaped. We bought our daughter a car for graduation, a van for our business, a full system computer and a fax machine. And we paid cash.

I have set up an investment program that is doing fine. Last year I increased my contribution to the SGI-USA six times what it was three years ago.

Today I can take my family to any restaurant in Atlanta. I can buy any pair of shoes I like. I can buy candles and incense for my altar by the case.

These are all wonderful things, but they can't compare with the treasures of the heart I gained through this experience. Most of the people I introduced to Buddhism over the years chose not to practice. Many of them are still suffering today. Now I can understand their suffering and hardships. I am determined to reintroduce them all to true Buddhism, one by one.

**WT**