

PERSPECTIVE: There's More To Happiness Than Being Happy
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There is no greater happiness for human beings than chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. ("Happiness in This World," *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 161)

Last week I attended a district leaders meeting in Washington, D.C., where we heard about the new five-year plan for the SGI-USA. It was very encouraging and centered on the family and the members. I was concerned, though, with our use of the word *happy* in describing our goal of having 100,000 active happy members.

The word *happy* has numerous interpretations. Many people think of *happy* as meaning always cheerful, always in high spirits. But it is probably a misconception to expect to be in high spirits all the time just because we're practicing Buddhism. I was concerned that our use of the word might lead people to believe that if they chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo they will be happy in this sense all the time.

Perhaps we should find another way — a different expression — to define our goal.

When I joined the SGI-USA (NSA at that time), my wife and I were hippies. We had run away from home in 1969 seeking love, peace, happiness and, in my case, freedom from responsibility. After months of eating brown rice and lentils and living on a friend's porch, we realized that we couldn't just survive on our ideals. The SGI-USA seemed like the perfect solution.

We were told that if we chanted, we could become happy and all our dreams would come true. So we taught ourselves gongyo while sitting every day in a West Los Angeles park and began to build a more constructive life together. After many years of practice, we built incredible fortune in our lives and acquired a deep sense of gratitude for the organization.

I rarely thought to ask what happiness was. I figured anything would be better than the severe depression and anguish I had suffered as a child and teenager.

Because of my intense desire to avoid depression, I developed an underlying belief that my true objective through my practice was to be happy all the time. That the enlightenment Nichiren Daishonin spoke about was somehow wrapped up in an unshakable condition of happiness, a total absence of pain. "Look at me," I would be able to proclaim. "Nothing can upset my positive, upbeat attitude."

And so I expended a tremendous amount of energy trying to maintain this condition. I actually got to the point where I knew exactly how much to chant each day to "stay happy." People came to expect and rely on my perpetual smile and good humor.

I was so frightened whenever I started to feel blue that I would do anything to get my smile back. Much of my chanting was centered (and self-centered) on staying in high spirits — as opposed to on more significant prayers. Deep inside I still had a lot of sadness and hurt. I had yet to understand what true happiness meant.

In retrospect, this misconception was probably exactly what I needed through my 20s and 30s to allow me to build a positive marriage, family and career. My unhappiness, like a strong ocean undertow, was a constant impetus to chant more Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and raise my life-condition. Because of it, I lifted myself above my unstable childhood. But, on a different level, I still needed to deal with the reality of my sadness.

Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. ("Happiness in This

World,” MW-1, 161)

About six months ago, with my wife’s serious illness as an additional pressure, I found myself no longer able to contain my sadness. I couldn’t keep it in its box. I became overwhelmed with grief. Fortunately, I sought professional help.

Through therapy and a reinvigorated study of Nichiren Daishonin’s writings, I started to realize that it was important to allow myself to experience my sadness and anger. Much of my adult behavior was patterned after negative childhood experiences and realities that were no longer valid. What a relief to realize that it was OK to be sad sometimes. That the fact that I might not be feeling happy at a given moment did not necessarily indicate that my practice was weak or my faith shallow! I finally began to accept and love myself — for the first time in my life.

By happy, I think we actually mean something close to “the joy or sense of fulfillment that arises from the realization that we are truly living in the moment; the confidence that comes from our sense of mission as Buddhists; and the ability to enjoy what there is to enjoy and suffer what there is to suffer.” Being happy is a sense of connectedness with everything around us.

Of course, my definition above is a lot to say every time we refer to our objective. Still, the words we use to describe major organizational goals are important. I realize we don’t really expect to have 100,000 happy members in the sense of them always smiling and being cheerful. Perhaps the word *fulfilled* would be more appropriate.

I had a really bad cold last week. At the same time, I found myself filled with joy as my wife and I celebrated our 28th wedding anniversary. Was I happy last week? Not really. On a physical level I felt miserable. But on a deeper level I felt extremely fulfilled.

Anyway, I hope someone will suggest a different word for this life-condition, one that won’t unintentionally confuse some people — and even cause them unhappiness. Such a word would make me very [insert word for happy].

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