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Chanting for My Mum

Jacqueline Lee transformed her troubled relationship with her mother — stricken with terminal cancer — to discover that even at the time of death, one can feel great joy.

I remember being very unhappy at home in England; my mother and I were constantly fighting. I couldn't wait to leave. I moved to California 20-odd years ago. I would call my mother once in a while and send her a birthday card. But she was no longer a major part of my life.

Eight years ago, I received a long distance call from my mother that I will always remember. Her voice was shaky and fearful. During a routine medical check-up her doctor had discovered something abnormal in her blood, she said. She had blood cancer, which produces abnormal protein cells that attack the bones and compromise the immune system. Without strong drug treatment, a specialist told her, she would die within a year. My mother begged me to come to England.

By this time I had been practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism for about 16 years, and I had developed confidence in my ability to encourage people who are struggling. But when I arrived in England, it seemed that no matter what I tried to do, I only made my mother more anxious and upset. All I could do was chant that somehow she would be OK, and somehow she would get the best help for her condition. I went back to California feeling very frustrated.

Soon my mother was referred to a hematologist who turned out to be one of the top specialists in this field in the world. He was truly compassionate and did not try any radical treatment with her; he just kept monitoring her blood count. This was the best treatment for my mother — no treatment.

At the time of her diagnosis, she was in her 70s. I just wanted her to enjoy her life. I didn't want her to go through the terrible pain that I have seen others with cancer go through. A fellow Buddhist enthusiastically encouraged me to send my mother daimoku to make her blood healthy. After this encouragement, I found that I could easily chant — I really felt my daimoku was reaching my mother's blood. Her doctor would check her blood count every so often. The disease was still there, but it wasn't getting worse.

I started to seriously chant about my mother. I couldn't take her for granted; she wouldn't always be there. My attitude toward her gradually transformed. Instead of feeling guilty about the situation and our relationship, which would have been my usual response, I decided to take action. I started calling my mother more frequently — every week without fail. Our conversations became more intimate.

I had never really opened up to my mother before. While growing up, whatever I did was never good enough. I felt that if she knew my weaknesses she would use them to criticize me and put me down. Now I was slowly showing her my vulnerable side. Sometimes she would criticize me but it wasn't devastating.

We began to build bonds of trust. She would share things with me that I never knew. I saw her not just as my mother but as an amazing person. My respect for her grew, and I felt that she started to respect me, too. I would visit her in England every year and our relationship became very close.

I continued to chant for her to be happy and enjoy her life. I had never sincerely chanted about my mother's happiness like that before. It felt so good to truly care about her and not

out of obligation. Even through all her negativity and criticism of me in the past, I realized that she truly cared about me; I was her daughter and all she wanted was my happiness.

The closer we got, the stronger my prayers for her became. I could see her life improve. For example, when she had a problem it would somehow turn around to her favor. She found a part-time job that she loved — which isn't easy when you're 70. And after that business closed down, she found another job the same day.

After her 75th birthday, she complained of pain in her arm. Tests identified a malignant tumor. I flew to England to be with her while she underwent outpatient radiology treatment. She even agreed to chant with me a little bit each day, which was absolutely amazing, since she had always said that chanting didn't seem to do me any good.

I know that she saw my life change for the better, but she would not admit that Buddhist practice had anything to do with it. All my chanting hadn't helped me meet a husband, my mother would often say. She really wanted to see me married. The fact that she agreed to chant with me showed that she respected what I was doing — she respected me.

Each day, we would chant and then go to the hospital for treatment. She was supposed to have side effects, such as nausea and general weakness, but the complete opposite occurred. She had more energy than before, and we would go out shopping and have a big meal together. She told me it was not because of the chanting, that it was a coincidence. You just don't argue with your mum...well, not my mum anyway. The malignant tumor was soon gone.

One year, instead of visiting her in England, we went away together to the coast of Spain. This was the first time we had traveled together since I was a child. Initially, it was a bit of a disaster, but we had some special times together. We confided in each other about our deepest feelings. We even laughed together to the point of tears rolling down our cheeks. I will never forget that time.

And little did I know that this was where I would meet my future husband. He was on vacation as well. A year later we were married. This made my mother feel more at ease that I was not alone. My husband was such a great support and comfort during this difficult time.

Last summer I visited England again. My mother was in the hospital. Evidently, the blood cancer was progressing and attacking her bones. Her doctor assured us that after chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment, she would recover. I read Nichiren Daishonin's "Reply to Kyo'o." This is a letter Nichiren Daishonin wrote to Shijo Kingo's young daughter who was very sick, on the verge of death. It reads: "Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?" And: "Kyo'o Gozen's misfortunes will change into fortune. Muster your faith...."

The more I would muster my faith and fight with daimoku, it seemed the sicker my mother got. I would leave the hospital intending to chant two or three hours, but I could hardly mouth the words — I was too tired, too discouraged. In the mornings, I would go to the hospital and do gongyo and chant in my mother's hospital room so she could hear the sound. That was the best I could do.

She was in so much pain — I had never seen her this way. Just like Kyo'o Gozen, her misfortune must change to fortune, I told myself. Deep inside, though, I was in despair. My mother was not getting better. The doctors assured me she would improve, but she was deteriorating. She began to lose control over her bodily functions. It was devastating to see my mother — this strong, vibrant, independent woman — in such a condition. Her pain was becoming unbearable for her and me.

I would always call my mother after I left the hospital just to say good night. One night, I called and she told me how depressed she was. All I could say was, "Oh, Mum, you know,

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when I get depressed, I chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and it makes me feel so much better!”

“OK,” she said, “let’s chant.”

We chanted together over the phone. I was surprised. I had never heard her chant that way before — she would always say the words wrong, but this time her pronunciation was perfect and her voice was strong and clear. That was the last time I would ever speak with my mother.

The next day, she fell into a deep sleep. She passed away peacefully a few days later.

I had been preparing for and dreading this moment since I first found out she had cancer. How would I handle it? Would the grief be overwhelming?

It is hard to explain. Through the fortune of this Buddhist practice and changing my relationship with my mum, I did not feel the deep pain of losing someone so close to me. Instead, I felt a deep sense of calm. As I chanted to the Gohonzon with my mother in my thoughts, I felt only joy. I saw that my prayer for her to triumph over this disease was achieved — but of course not in the way I had expected.

Instead of her death causing a void in my life, I felt that something was replenished. I was revitalized to continue on. I know deep in my heart that she also was revitalized. Death is not the end, and even at the time of death one can experience great joy.

My mother is always with me, and life goes on.

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