

YUICHI ONO, KENT, OHIO
My Mother's Greatest Hope

When he was 9, Yuichi Ono fled from his abusive father with his mother and sisters. As social outcasts in Japan, they endured poverty and hunger. Yuichi became a very unhappy boy, fighting with other kids and doing poorly in school. Today, he is a doctoral candidate at Kent State University — Buddhist practice and his mother's determination are what turned his troubles into assets, he says.

I will never forget the cold evening 22 years ago when my mother, two younger sisters and I left our home. I was 9, and my sisters were 8 and 7. We got into a taxi, and as it pulled away, I watched through the rear window as my home disappeared into the distance. I thought of my friends, that we would never play together again. I wished I could have said good-bye.

But we had to get away from my father.

We lived in Japan, and my father was raised in a good, traditional family. He was highly educated, sensitive and once dreamed of being a writer. After marriage, though, he began to feel a gap between his dreams and reality.

My mother had been practicing Buddhism for several years, but my father refused to chant. He drank a lot to forget his disappointments. And he started beating my mother when he got drunk. He beat my sisters and me, too.

My middle sister was abused so badly that as a child she was afraid of everything. She became a slow learner and could not speak well, always crying.

My mother had to hide the Gohonzon during the night because my father hated it intensely. While he was at work, she chanted to change her negative karma and improve our situation. Then one evening, my father took a knife and threatened to kill my mother. She could not move because she was paralyzed with fear, and so was I.

My middle sister, suddenly, at the crucial moment, stood up and stopped him. Because of this incident, my mother decided to leave him.

So we moved to a small apartment. We could not go out for a while because we were afraid that my father was going to find us and maybe kill us. We faced severe poverty. We were always hungry.

My mother worked very hard, getting up early to distribute newspapers, working as a traffic inspector and an insurance saleswoman — as well as taking care of us. She chanted and taught others about Buddhism. Despite hard times, she bought us books by great writers and famous classical music records.

The most effective education for us, though, was to see her studying at night after a long, stressful day.

Later, my parents faced each other in divorce court. Father wanted custody of me. If Mother had given me up, she would have received a lot of money from my father — she would never have had to worry about money. But she protected me because she cared about my future, and because she was determined to raise me to strive for kosen-rufu.

Japanese society did not accept divorced women, and many people, including our relatives, spoke ill of us or ignored us. Mother sometimes felt hopeless.

One cold night, she took our hands, and we walked and walked without any direction in the dark. Then Mother said, "Let's die together by walking in front of a moving train." She led us to the railroad. My sisters and I could only cry.

But then Mother remembered her favorite quote from Nichiren Daishonin: "Those who

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believe in the Lotus Sutra are as if in winter, which never fails to turn into spring” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 150). This one short phrase saved our lives. Mother renewed her determination to endure our “winter” and to change our karma.

At school, I was having other problems. It was a special school for wealthy people that my father had wanted me to attend. One day I invited my friend to our apartment. I thought we had a good time, but the next day I heard another classmate say, “Yuichi lives in a dirty place.” I used to be a friendly, nice boy, but my smile then disappeared from my face. I started fighting with classmates. This was my revenge on society.

By the end of elementary school, I became the worst student ever at my school. I played tricks on my classmates. I stole snacks from stores. I was scolded by teachers at least once every day. I really needed help.

One day a teacher shouted, “You do not deserve to be in this school!”

I said: “I did not choose to be here. My father did!” There were no teachers who could understand me, listen to me or help me.

The only one place where I could go back to being a normal child was the future division of the Soka Gakkai. The Soka Gakkai people were not fake. They encouraged me with SGI President Ikeda’s guidance: “Never, ever give up! Facing your difficulties will be your asset in the future, if you continue practicing Buddhism! The world is waiting for you. The 21st century is your stage. For that, you should study hard now. Polish yourself!”

So I started chanting.

One year passed, then two years. I saw progress.

But in ninth grade, I was chanting to win any and all fights. Then I got into a fight with the Yakuza, which is a kind of Japanese Mafia, and I lost. I was bleeding badly, had bruises all over my body, and was hospitalized.

When I saw Mother appeasing the Yakuza with money, I regretted what I had done and could not stop my tears. “I am just like my father, causing a lot of trouble for my mother,” I thought.

My mother did not scold me, but she looked so sad. I deeply determined that I would be a good son of whom she could be proud, and I quit fighting with people.

Instead, I started fighting myself, challenging myself, like President Ikeda said. I chanted seriously. It was not at all easy, but I studied as much as I could, spending more than seven hours a day to catch up on my studies. At times I was depressed, feeling that I wasn’t smart. But then I would think of my mother. “She is selflessly struggling for me,” I would say to myself. “I am her hope. I cannot betray her!”

When I had a hard time studying, I would chant, read President Ikeda’s poetry, then study again. Several months later, my grades started going up. My classmates saw that my attitude was also improving. People said that I had changed. My sisters’ grades also improved.

Our neighbors and my classmates no longer spoke ill of us. Some of them were, instead, even jealous. This is the human world: When we are in bad circumstances, people speak ill of us. When we are in good circumstances, people become jealous. I learned that their evaluations of me were nonsense and that I should seek a higher standard for my life.

As a family, we overcame each problem, one by one. My mother married again recently. She turned 55 this year and is living happily in Japan. She does not have to work anymore — she is actually a millionaire now. She enjoys playing with her grandchildren. She has built up an invincible, high life-condition based on Buddhism.

My middle sister, who used to be a slow learner, graduated from her school with honors and became a nurse. My youngest sister was accepted by one of the most competitive universities in Japan and graduated with honors. I am very proud of my sisters because they

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always care for others, even if they are struggling themselves.

I continued to practice Buddhism and studied hard to receive my master's degree. In 1994, I was accepted to the doctoral program at Kent State University in Ohio, studying geography. My mission is to save people from natural hazards, especially in developing countries. My current project is to mitigate tornado hazards by adapting underground tornado shelters in Bangladesh. I am confident that it will save a lot of lives.

When I look back over this 22-year period, I feel that President Ikeda's words that I heard when I was little are absolutely true — all my troubles have become my assets. Now I believe the reason why I was born into a poor, suffering family was to prove the power of Buddhist practice, so that I could encourage even one other suffering family — through my own experience — that there is hope for a happy, fulfilling future.

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