

LLOYD FISCHEL, PACIFIC PALISADES, CALIF.
Thirty Years of Growth

During his struggles with financial problems, Lloyd Fischel used to ask, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ But in the course of 30 years of Buddhist practice, he has come to see that his struggles have fueled his growth.

SGI President Ikeda has said that one should look forward to 10, 20 or 30 years of Buddhist practice, because sometimes it takes that long to change the darker aspects of one’s life into a happy and fortunate existence. Over the years, when I heard or read this, I cringed inside. I thought, “I hope I won’t have to practice for 30 years before I change my horrible destiny.”

Well, the years passed and, in December 1997, I began my 30th year of non-stop practice.

In the course of my practice, I’ve received many benefits. The greatest benefits have been the internal transformations — or human revolution — the changes that grow gradually, and perhaps imperceptibly, but become more and more visible and concrete over time.

One area of my life, though, seemed never to change. Debt has been a recurring problem for me — both owing money and being owed. It goes back to when I was 8 years old, and my father was delinquent on his monthly child support payments. My unfortunate karma was that my mother called on me to be the collector. In my adult life, in business, some companies did not pay me according to our agreements. So here I was, many years later, still trying to collect debts. I also have debts of my own, some of which date back to my days in law school, and the work I did to propagate Buddhism in the former Soviet Union.

All of this led me to last year, the hardest year of my life. I found myself with no money, not even a quarter, and only one credit card — a gas card.

It’s true that we each create our karma — so, clearly, I had made both internal and external causes to have brought about these circumstances. I not only needed to repair my external situation, I needed to change my fundamental beliefs, which were at the root of my suffering over money.

Over the course of that year I chanted 1 million daimoku and found the right attorney to help me file suit against a company that owed me money. I did not know how long it would take, but I determined that this fight would be for a much higher prize than money. I wanted this battle to once and for all clean out this aspect of my karma.

However, my wife of less than two years did not see it the same way. She was angry and afraid, my business was failing, and she did not wish to weather the storm, at least with me. While it hurt a great deal because I loved her and was truly dedicated to our marriage, I could not help but see that as my entire life was changing, so would the people in my life.

President Ikeda once said: “A saying goes, ‘Adversity makes the man.’ Adversity is a severe fatherlike teacher for your self-perfection. Only when you put yourself in a position from which you can never retreat even a single step can you display your hidden capabilities.”

My Buddhist practice became intense. I was chanting every chance I had. Between phone calls at the office, in the car, during TV commercials, waking up in the middle of the night, I could be found chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Desperate to understand more deeply why I was going through these current hardships after practicing so diligently, I turned to Nichiren Daishonin’s writings. This became a great source of inspiration.

Reading letters written some 700 years ago, I found in them new meaning. I came to think

about Nichiren Daishonin and the challenges he faced. In one letter he discussed how he felt being on Sado Island where he had been sent by government decree. (At that time, such an exile was tantamount to a death sentence.) I thought how miserable Nichiren Daishonin must have felt being convicted of treason for speaking out for equality and justice. I thought about our present-day lives and people who suffer because of beliefs in basic freedoms. I thought about people throughout history who have suffered because of this.

We can read in his words how truly human the Daishonin was. He talks about emotions that are very much the same as any person might have in the course of plain living. Reading the Daishonin's writings gave me the understanding that I can put my own courage to good use, and I, too, can demand protection from the universe so that I can prove the value of my life.

After all is said, the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is difficult to carry out day after day. The Daishonin steadfastly determined to practice no matter what while facing seemingly insurmountable odds. This understanding gave my chanting more brilliance and tenacity, and I felt more robust.

During this time, I did receive some money that was owed to me. It kept me alive. As the months wore on, the money wore thin. But money was no longer my prime concern.

I had gotten way past asking questions like, "Why is this happening to me?" or, "How I could be 40-something and have practiced this Buddhism for more than two-thirds of my life and still have so many very compelling problems?"

I had come to love the practice of self-challenge based on life itself — the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and taking action based on sharing Buddhist principles. Because of this battle within myself, I became fully aware that my life transcends the designer labels of things we can purchase.

I have become fully confident that as a practitioner of the greatest religious practice in the world, without serious troubles I would have little reason to practice — and with serious troubles I have all the necessary ingredients to create a truly happy inner life. The question of "why" became rather childish, something I have left behind for good. To me, this is an indication that I have grown in faith.

Also, I resolved not to let my lack of money stop me from living my life to the best of my ability. In May, I went to the Florida Nature and Culture Center for a seminar on the Lotus Sutra. Following the wonderful conference, I planned to fly to New York to visit my sister and brother-in-law who had just given birth to my new nephew, Aden. I had decided that I would sleep on the floor since the beds were taken by other relatives. I didn't have money for a hotel, barely enough to pay for expenses.

The day before I was to leave for New York, the law suit settled. I had fought hard and won a rather handsome settlement, and just in the nick of time! Even though I now had money to stay in a great hotel in New York, I chose to sleep on the floor. I really enjoyed the sweetness of it all.

With the settlement I have been able to make a contribution to the SGI-USA and pay off my bills. But the money is just the "icing on the cake," not the cake itself. The real benefit is that I can look back over 30 years of practice and see how much I've grown and changed internally, how I've gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of life. I can breathe, eat and live. I definitely have become a new person. I feel like I have received a second life.

I thank you for the opportunity to share this experience with you, as I chanted long and hard with the idea that one day I would be able to do so.

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