

Buddhists in the Community: Walking for Life

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When I overheard a couple of friends at work talking about a three-day walk from Santa Barbara to Malibu to raise funds for fighting breast cancer, I thought it sounded like a neat idea. What an understatement.

I had been, at that time, engaged in pushing myself out of complacency and toward a more value-creating life. At 47, after more than 24 years of Buddhist practice, I had become pretty comfortable: great wife and family, great job, lax practice. I had made a resolution the previous year to get more involved and reawaken the dormant energy and spirit of my youth.

When I heard about this event, I did not equate it with Buddhist activities, but it sounded like a good thing to do. I was a little worried, though, because I suffered from a crushed disc in my back. But I liked the cause. So I signed up.

The event was sponsored by Avon and put together by the same people who organize the AIDS rides, and they are very professional. They sent me a lot of information and literature and assigned me to a “walker coach.” I didn’t read much of the paperwork and never called the coach, but I did start walking on the weekends. At first it was a push to do four or five miles, but I gradually worked up to 10 or so. Then there was a 15-mile pre-walk day in Santa Monica that I attended.

It was the hottest day of the year, and I found out why I should have read the literature and contacted the coach. I made it through the day, but only just. I was in pain for a week! What a wake-up call.

After that, I got in touch with some of the walkers in my area and began to train in earnest. About four weeks before the event, after a 24-mile walk, my back was in such agony that I was ready to quit. My left leg would go numb, and my left arm started to do so as well. This alternated with shooting pains and a steady, sharp ache in my lower back all the time.

And then something great happened: I remembered. I remembered that when I was a young man making great causes for the spread of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, I learned that the only thing standing between me and victory was...me. With my sincere prayer to the Gohonzon and my determination, I could do anything. When had I forgotten this? “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step...” or something like that. And this was only 60 or 70 miles!

So I chanted and walked with members of my training group. And I found that, during hours of walking with one or two people, I talked to them. I found out about people’s lives and they found out about mine. And when I walked alone I would quietly chant while I walked, sometimes six or more hours a day.

I kept the stretching exercises up, and I kept walking. The back pain was not really going away, but my spirit and my resolve were strengthening. And I liked what was happening to me. (I also lost almost 20 pounds!)

My wife and little girl drove me up to Santa Barbara on Oct. 22 for registration and orientation. The most impressive part was the hourlong video where Avon stressed safety, the cause we were fighting for and, most important, humanity. They emphasized the need for kindness and asked every participant to put aside complaint and whining and to be kind. It was a great message.

We left at dawn on Friday morning and walked about 18 miles. I walked for a while with a woman who was 70 years old and had been diagnosed with cancer less than a year before and was still in chemotherapy. I talked to a woman who had had a double mastectomy in

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May, and she was walking with us. I put my pain aside and soaked in the courage around me, and I thought a lot about my mother, who died of cancer seven years ago.

For me it ended in pain, physically, but with a tremendous feeling that this was an important place to be. At camp that night, I saw the chiropractor, and then I signed up to sing for the next evening's talent show. I had not performed in public for more than 25 years, but I thought, why not?

The next day was "short," only about 14 miles, but it was difficult — waking up was easy, but *getting* up was excruciating. Later, at camp that afternoon, I couldn't believe my back pain.

The interesting thing, though, was that I continued to have the most amazing life-to-life conversations with complete strangers. They were all interested in me, and I was fascinated by all of them. I found myself really listening and really appreciating each person's struggles. And I found myself really trying to help, even though mostly that just meant listening. It's not an ability for which I am famous.

Right before the talent show, I was off rehearsing by myself, and a lady I had not noticed complimented me. I was a little embarrassed, but then I chatted with her a while. She was from Ohio and had lost her mother to cancer 20 years ago. She wrote her mother's name on a slip of paper, and I put it in my shirt pocket.

Then I went off to do evening gongyo and chant, and I found that my prayer was that I could somehow encourage these wonderful people or lighten their hearts or touch them, a little bit. I dedicated the song I performed, "Let It Be," to that lady's mother, whose name was next to my heart, to my mom and to all the walkers. They were certainly a kind crowd and seemed to enjoy the tune.

After my performance, a young woman named Karen came up and told me a story about her mother, who had died when she was 13. The last letter that Karen had sent to her mother contained the lyrics of a song that she found to be particularly full of hope, and her mother died shortly after that. It was "Let It Be." Karen told me that she felt that her journey was complete when she heard me sing it. She cried, I cried, and I told her about my prayer. She thanked me and went away, but I was filled with appreciation for her words.

The next day was incredible. I forced myself to ignore the pain and walked. It was 25 miles that day, and the third day of hammering my back and sleeping on the ground. I just talked to people and walked, and the most amazing thing was that so many of them thanked me for my music and said that it really touched them.

I finished the walk and was met by my wife and my little girl, and I came home and survived. The projections for the walk were to raise \$2.5 million, but the actual total was over \$5 million! I was especially encouraged to find out that most of the money was going to early detection and prevention for "under-served" women, meaning poor and minority women — definitely a life-saving effort.

Looking back, I realize that I did something for those three days that I do not usually do. For three days, I was the best person I could be. And I kind of like that guy.

Personally, I benefited greatly. But more important, there are tens or hundreds of people out there with whom I interacted who might remember the nice guy with the great stories or the good songs — who was a Buddhist.

My back still hurts, but I'm now inspired to get the right kind of help to fix it. And I've lost 25 pounds!

But what's so much more important is the lesson I've learned — again — about youthful spirit, about not giving up, about what it means to be a bodhisattva and a representative of the Daishonin's Buddhism.

I'll walk again next year.

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