

'COULDN'T SING TO SAVE MY LIFE!' **BY DUNCAN SHEIK, NEW YORK**

Duncan Sheik's self-titled debut album went gold in 1996, selling more than 700,000 copies. One song, "Barely Breathing," was one of the longest charting songs in *Billboard* magazine history, and earned him a Grammy nomination. "All these visible rewards aren't so incredible in and of themselves. Lots of artists and bands break every year. But it is incredible in my case when you consider that, in 1990, when I began to practice in earnest and started helping out at the SGI-USA community center, I couldn't sing in public to save my life!"

I BEGAN practicing Buddhism in 1989 when I was 19 years old. I had been studying Eastern religions in college and reading people like Krishnamurti on my own, searching for a more profound view of life than the Catholicism I had been brought up with.

I went to visit Mari Gorman, my mother's cousin, in Los Angeles that summer of 1989. She had been a Buddhist for almost twenty years and, despite my protests that there was no one way to the truth, she quickly got me in front of the Gohonzon chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In fact, the first time I chanted for two hours. I might have kept going but Mari came back in the room, laughed and said, "That's probably good enough for today."

There were several reasons I let go of my skepticism at that moment. For one, though I was still in college, I wanted to begin my career as a musician and recording artist, and I felt a little bit at sea as to how to go about it. Also, earlier that year, I had become anxiety ridden. I felt like the world was upside down, and I had no place in it. Sometimes this feeling was debilitating, and I would have to leave in the middle of a class just to calm myself down. The genius of Buddhism, I later realized, is that, while not denying or avoiding the upside-down nature of society, when you chant, it becomes clear that working to better yourself and your environment is in itself the road to happiness.

At a youth meeting in Boston in 1990 I agreed to help with some of the volunteer activities that ensure the safety and comfort of members at SGI-USA culture and community centers. At first I was confused by the regimentation that seemed to contradict my understanding of Buddhism. I spent a lot of time worrying that my friends from college might see me wearing what I thought were ridiculous white outfits with horrible red polyester ties. However, I continued to do those activities because I knew, somewhere deep inside, that it was an enormously positive thing to do. Without realizing it I was practicing for myself while practicing for others. I now know that this is the most effective way to practice Buddhism.

For the next five years I continued to volunteer my time and effort and sure enough, just as Nichiren Daishonin says, "unseen virtue" does bring about "visible rewards." The past three years of my life easily attest to this. I am a singer-songwriter and recording artist and I was signed to Atlantic records in 1995. After the success of my first album, I played on dozens of TV shows all over the world and toured the most fantastic places non-stop for more than two years. That success enabled me to set up my own recording studio and earned me the creative and financial freedom to record my second CD.

Although I have played guitar and keyboards for more than twenty years, I was self-conscious about my voice until very recently. One reason I started chanting was because I felt

blocked creatively, and I hated the sound of my singing voice. When I began chanting I realized that I needed to sing and to communicate to people through my voice and my songs—and not just make instrumental music for my own listening pleasure. Without the philosophy of Buddhism to give me hope and to galvanize me, I may well have resigned myself to my fears of not being a good-enough singer. There certainly seemed to be hurdles in front of me that I could not jump, and there were many times between 1990 and 1995 when I thought nothing would ever happen with my dream of making records.

But, of course, I was chanting a lot to be able to realize my dream, doing a lot of activities at the culture center, and reading everything by SGI President Ikeda I could get my hands on. I particularly love his book *Life, an Enigma, a Precious Jewel* in which he states:

The fundamental way to establish Buddhahood as the basis of one's life is simply to practice Buddhism in everyday life and conduct. Continuous, tenacious practice of Buddhism is the means of absorbing the cosmic life-force and making it flow energetically within one's own life. Actual practice brings out the Buddhahood dormant in the depths of our lives. By this I mean actual practice in the nine states of real life for they are the field in which Buddhahood operates as an active force.

THESE kinds of ideas, coupled with the SGI spirit to never give up, fighting until you win, seeped into my life. It gave me the courage to get up on stage, even when I felt really uncomfortable, and the strength to change my voice into something I could use by working hard on my technique. And that's the other part of the story—you have to take action, continuously! Just sitting there chanting, without taking action, is obviously just wishing on a star. That was a tough lesson for someone as inherently lazy as me.

Speaking of stars, I read something recently about star formation that intrigued me. The theory was that a star is born when a cloud of dust and gas is given sufficient time, peace and quiet to start its own gravitational collapse, and it ultimately ends up imploding into a bright young star.

Recently, astrophysicists have discovered that, near the black hole at the center of our galaxy, stars are forming quickly and furiously where they thought stars would never have the peace and quiet to form. In fact, it seems that the intense bombardment of energy around a black hole actually whacks the would-be stars into advanced stages of development, speeding along the process greatly. This sounded to me like what it is like to practice Buddhism. One's life grows very bright, not despite adversity but because of it. Because of fear, I couldn't sing a note, and I had a pessimistic view of my future and the world. By chanting to overcome those obstacles, my faith deepened and I became stronger. Now it seems to me that the power of abundant prayer, coupled with the good fortune one earns doing Buddhist activities, along with constant determined action, is an unbeatable combination.

Last year I flew to Spain with an incredible group of musicians to record my second album, which would come to be called *Humming*. It was a truly joyous experience. After recording string arrangements in London and mixing in Los Angeles, it was completed in August. I am really proud of it. What I am now realizing, however, is that the struggle must always continue. I don't think one attains Buddhahood and then just coasts through the rest of life with a big grin.

IN my case, despite the great critical praise *Humming* has earned, I'm having to work harder than ever to actually sell it to people! And it's made me ask many questions about what

Title: Couldn't Sing To Save My Life!

Subject: Living Buddhism 06/99 v.99 n.6 p.42 LB9906p42

Author: Duncan Sheik

Keywords: Artists Career Couldnt Difference Duncan Experiences Life Making People Save Sheik Sing

kind of music I want to make and what kind of artist I want to be: Should I make music completely on my own terms, or should I be thinking to please an audience? Now that I've found a voice how do I use it?

This brings me to my last point. Our ultimate goal in our practice of this Buddhism is to create value and help the people around us overcome whatever suffering they may be experiencing. We are only able to show the power of Buddhism when we ourselves overcome the obstacles that constantly arise when we try to create value. If there were no obstacles to overcome, there would be no way to show the power inherent in Buddhist practice. This is a lesson I'm still learning.

The fact is that there is enormous room for improvement in the world we live in. It is filled with ideas and philosophies that are, at best, not very helpful and, at worst, dangerous and the cause of much suffering. Recently I began to feel like my practice had become a bit self-involved, I didn't feel like I was practicing for others in any direct way. I chanted about this and, with an uncanny immediacy, I was contacted by the head of Warchild USA. Warchild is an organization that gets children out of harm's way in war-torn countries or dangerous neighborhoods. Their ideals mirror those of the SGI in that their ultimate goal is to eradicate the very idea of war in the twenty-first century. I am currently committed to visiting refugee camps in Albania where I hope to focus on encouraging children thru my music. I am amazed at how quickly one's prayers are answered with the Gohonzon.

And I am truly grateful to be a part of this incredible group of bodhisattvas, the SGI.□

Title: Couldn't Sing To Save My Life!

Subject: Living Buddhism 06/99 v.99 n.6 p.42 LB9906p42

Author: Duncan Sheik

Keywords: Artists Career Couldnt Difference Duncan Experiences Life Making People Save Sheik Sing