

EXPERIENCE — SARAH J. M. JONES, SAN FRANCISCO MY LIFE HAS COME FULL CIRCLE

Establishing my law career and finding a home in one of the most competitive markets in the nation is just one of the great benefits of my Buddhist practice.

In 1992, I graduated from law school in St. Louis, Mo. I wanted to move to San Francisco and establish a career in law there eventually, but I decided first to take the Illinois State Bar and practice in Chicago for a while. However, problems in my family erupted during the summer after graduation, so I decided to move to San Francisco immediately. I knew moving would be difficult but I wasn't prepared for the challenges that lay ahead of me.

I had lived in San Francisco years earlier and many of my friends were still there. One very good friend said I could camp out in her living room while I searched for a job. I was confident I could find a job quickly, after all, by that time I had been chanting for more than six years, had a law degree and had passed one state's Bar exam.

When I arrived in the Bay Area, I started looking for a job immediately. My friend, whose apartment I was sharing, and I thought this time would be an opportunity to enjoy one another's company because it wouldn't be long before I'd be working and on my way. Little did we realize that we were both very wrong. Seven months later, I was still sleeping on her couch.

By then, I had decided to take any job just to make money. I was working part time in a women's clothing store and doing contract legal work where and when I could. To make matters worse, my family was again in upheaval; I was speaking to only one sibling out of a family of 12. By that time, after seven years of practice, I was struggling to believe my life would ever change.

At one point, after receiving encouragement in faith, I mailed out 300 resumes, only to receive about 100 rejection letters and no response at all from the rest. Despite my efforts to stay current with my bills, it was around this time that my car was repossessed. I was devastated. I couldn't believe what was happening to me. I constantly sought advice, wondering if I should even work in the legal field or remain in the Bay Area.

By this time I was staying in the home of someone who didn't chant so I had not set up my altar; if I wanted to chant in front of the Gohonzon, I had to go to the San Francisco Culture Center or to another member's home. The good news is that I had plenty of free time to travel around the city by bus.

I was seeking lots of encouragement from seniors in faith. One woman told me that to truly change my situation, I should find one person who was suffering and help that person become happy through this Buddhism; then I, too, would become happy. I couldn't believe my ears. I had just told her that I didn't have a job, didn't have my own apartment and my relationship with my family was at an all-time low. How was I supposed to tell someone else about the greatness of this practice? I left feeling angry and incredulous.

But after chanting about the guidance, I decided to put it to the test. I began to focus all of my efforts helping revitalize the practice of a young woman in my district who was having difficulty. I would take the BART train, a bus, then walk to her house. I chanted for her at every opportunity. We went to meetings together and I did everything I could to support her practice. This enabled me to really develop a selfless heart for others and experience deep compassion for their circumstances.

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Author: Sarah J. M. Jones

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Amazingly, little by little, my own circumstances began to change as I continued to take action. I found a full-time job in a law office, which allowed me to move into my own small apartment that came fully furnished. I also began to do legal work at the federal level in immigration law.

In 1995, I was asked to be the San Francisco Byakuren leader. I would be responsible for the training and encouragement of young women from Sacramento to San Jose, which covers a distance of about 150 miles. I was determined to continue implementing and even expand on the guidance I had received; I decided to visit many Byakuren members to help them become the happiest young women in the world. I visited young women in Fresno, Sacramento, throughout the East Bay, in Marin, and all over San Francisco. Many times I would go straight from federal court to a Byakuren member's home.

Although this was very difficult, I saw the results in the lives of the young women and in my own life. I encountered another immigration attorney who became my mentor. She taught me the nuts and bolts of running a law office and encouraged me to start a law practice of my own. She was always available to answer any questions I had about difficult cases. This I feel was a direct result of my efforts to protect and support others. I've really learned that in this Buddhist practice, when we concentrate on others' happiness as well as on our own, our lives change and grow.

In February 1997, I opened my own immigration law office in San Francisco. I have four full-time assistants and my practice has grown quickly. In less than two years, I have well over 400 clients. My increasing good fortune has enabled me to purchase a new car and a home.

Through challenging my weaknesses as I carried out my activities in the SGI-USA, I developed deeper levels of patience, compassion and selflessness. Because of this I saw changes taking place in my relationships with my family. Last January I was able to host a birthday party for my oldest brother, the first birthday party he's ever had; and I've visited two of my sisters and a brother in San Diego with whom I hadn't spoken in years. Following that visit, my oldest sister came out to visit me.

I feel that my life has come full circle, from those days when I was wondering if this practice works at all, to the determination I now have to continue devoting my efforts toward the happiness of others while striving for my own individual happiness.

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