

## EXPERIENCE — PARIS DAVIS, JACKSONVILLE, FLA. STILL GOING ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF 82

I am a few months on the opposite side of 82,” opens Paris Davis as he shares with gratitude the milestones in his Buddhist practice. While growing up in Jacksonville, he played piano for fun. After high school, he used money saved for college to open a restaurant with his brother. The first barbecue place in segregated North Jacksonville, it became a howling success, a true social hangout. He saved enough money to select any college he wanted.

After a stint in the Army academy, he attended Howard University where he earned a degree in music education. “That was challenging for me because there were no music teachers in Jacksonville at that time doing what I was doing: working with children, getting them to learn something about music,” Paris adds.

He decided to attend the University of Florida to be closer to his family. At that time, the university didn’t accept black students, so instead they paid for his graduate school tuition at Teachers College, Columbia University. He started teaching music in Jacksonville in 1948.

Paris first learned of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism 27 years ago from letters and issues of the *World Tribune* his nephew Alonzo sent while stationed with the military in Germany.

After Alonzo’s return to Jacksonville, Paris’ brother, also Alonzo, became concerned about his son’s involvement in Buddhism and association with people he didn’t know. Paris explains: “My brother asked me to find out what this Buddhism was all about. He knew that I could talk with my nephew more easily than he could. Of course he would tell him what to do, but I was going to ask Alonzo about whatever he was into. My nephew talked to me very freely, and I thought, ‘If Alonzo invites me to a meeting, I’ll go and find out.’ One Sunday morning, Alonzo asked me to go to a meeting.”

At that time Paris was the minister of music at a church, and agreed to go provided he could be back in time to conduct his choir. He says: “I went to the meeting and was just overwhelmed by the people, the attitude and the general atmosphere of this Buddhist meeting. I said I would like to go again.” He started going regularly.

At one meeting George Reagan, a senior in faith, advised him to try chanting; if it didn’t work, then he could stop. Paris decided to try it. George encouraged him to identify something he had tried to change in his life unsuccessfully — for Paris, it was quitting cigarettes.

After about six or seven months of chanting, Paris woke up one morning, after having a foreboding dream, bringing home to him the need to quit smoking. He resolved, “This is the day I’m going to stop.” And from then on he never had a craving for cigarettes again. Paris adds, “I told the members, ‘This proves to me that Buddhism works.’”

Several years later he had a major stroke. “I lost my speech, my equilibrium, just about everything,” Paris elaborates. “I felt my feet were very firmly fixed on the ground with Buddhism, that nothing could happen to me, but I was mistaken. Buddhism doesn’t prevent things from happening to you.” His faith was a bit shaken.

“Mr. Reagan helped me through this,” he says. “He is a great friend in faith. Also the practice of Buddhism had become clearer to me through my realization that everybody would have difficulties, that overcoming them brings about happiness.

“I prayed to understand my situation. I was moving my lips, reciting gongyo, but I couldn’t hear any sound,” Paris continues. “A nurse came into the room and asked me who was in there, and I moved my lips, ‘Nobody.’ The nurse said, ‘There was a voice of a person making strange sounds in this room.’”

Paris realized it must be himself even though he couldn’t hear the sounds. He explains, “When I began to get my speech back, I found out that the part of my brain that had acquired this new information with the Buddhist practice was not damaged, but I had no ability to discuss anything prior to that.”

He adds: “To me that was a miracle. I had to learn how to speak English all over again, which proved to me that the Gohonzon was working and dispelled all doubt in my mind. I understood that Buddhism was actually working for me. So I learned how to speak again, regained my equilibrium and started ice skating again.

“The other most important thing was that burglar I found in my car....”

Once after shopping, Paris entered his car to find a person with a knife in the back seat. When he complained of hunger, Paris tried to take him to a fast food restaurant, which had already closed. After insisting Paris take him somewhere else, Paris suspected he would be killed.

He thought: “If I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die in my house where the Gohonzon is. We arrived, and I fixed him a sandwich. I had no fear because of the way he was behaving, except for the knife.”

The burglar put his arm around Paris’ neck. Assuring Paris he meant no harm, he tied his hands and feet, and told him to lie on his stomach. Paris explains: “He was moving around, and I said, ‘Would you let me go to my prayer room and pray while you do whatever you’re doing?’” Sure enough the assailant untied his feet and walked him to the Gohonzon room. Paris knelt down in front of the Gohonzon and started chanting, and the intruder wanted to know what those words meant.

“So I told him: ‘I wish you would try chanting. You would probably change your mind about doing whatever you plan to do to me.’ And the burglar said: ‘I don’t want to hurt you, as long as you just sit there and say your strange words, and don’t bother about what I’m doing. I won’t hurt you.’” So he began loading up Paris’ car with stolen objects and apologized that he also needed to take the car.

Paris remembers asking, “Will you chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo?” He explains that the burglar “struggled to say it and then promised the car would be returned if he wasn’t reported. He left me chanting. I must have chanted about 25 or 30 minutes and the telephone rang. I didn’t know whose voice it was when he said, ‘I was at your house a little while ago, and I’m calling to let you know where your car is.’”

Paris went with another member to pick up the car, and the keys were hidden under a fender. “I drove back home because, of course, that was the end of it,” he says. “It was so strange. I didn’t get a scratch.”

Paris had a second stroke, “but it was not as bad. I really had some very difficult times but the thing is, here I am!” he exclaims. “I have found in the past 24 years that Buddhism actually works for me, even when I had two strokes, and I never gave up even through these difficulties. My confidence in the practice was strengthened by overcoming these two critical illnesses and the burglar encounter.”

Paris brims with gratitude as he shares his life: “I was never a selfish person, but the change in life-condition through practicing Buddhism made me happy, confident in whatever I needed to do to become a complete individual.

“Right now I feel I must do gongyo first thing in the morning to set this day right,” he adds, “and enjoy this day to the fullest. I don’t do anything without the support of my practice. I feel that whatever I do, I must do it to the best of my ability. Buddhism has caused me to feel this way. I feel that if I do what I am called upon to do with full dedication and enthusiasm, I’m going to be happy at my goal’s end, and that is what keeps me alive.”

What did Paris’ family think about his practicing Buddhism? “My mother understood at the time that I decided to become a Buddhist,” he answers. “She said she could see a great change in me. My attitude about myself, and just in general, had changed. She said while she would not ever change from Christianity, it was all right for me because she felt that was good for me, and she couldn’t find anything wrong with my practicing Buddhism. As a matter of fact, [although she never officially converted to this Buddhism] she chanted to the end of her life.”

Wrapping up, Paris reflects: “Well, I can say, after all these years of practice, the greatest thing is feeling I have this power within me to change difficulties into benefits. Mr. Reagan helped to plant that in my mind after my first stroke. I thought the man was out of his mind — ‘Bring on the problems!’ I had enough of them. He was telling me in essence that when you have problems, it is the experience in overcoming them that brings about happiness. I will always remember Mr. Reagan, and that experience at the hospital. It helped me to understand how to use Buddhism in my life.

“I give my all to everything that I do in my life,” he emphasizes, “attempting to show my appreciation for Buddhism. No matter what I do or attempt to do, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo precedes it. I don’t do anything without being aware that I can achieve my goal whatever it is, no matter how small, through the support of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.”

Paris concludes: “I don’t take life lightly. I think my life, through my practice, will be a happier one when I’ve reached my end than it would be if I didn’t practice Buddhism. I used to give up, thinking that I can’t do something; it’s impossible. But my practice of Buddhism encourages me to move forward, and I eventually overcome the difficulty. My years of practicing Buddhism have been my happiest years.”

Paris treasures his ability to live independently. He continues to amaze himself. What does he see as his most important challenge? At a recent meeting, Paris reflected in earnest on his deep desire to share this Buddhism with others, “so that they can feel the unlimited power I feel.”

*As told to Andy Bruck and Joan Edwards*