

EXPERIENCE — MARK ALLEN DAVIS, NEW YORK CITY THE ROAR OF 'THE LION KING'

When Mark Allen Davis prayed with an 'I refuse to lose' attitude, he turned his life around, smashed through his darkness and wound up with a part in the Broadway musical 'The Lion King.'

A few years ago I was doing Gajokai (security) at the culture center Villa Sachsen in Bingen, Germany. The building was still under construction at that time. When I was asked by the architect to use a sledgehammer and break up an existing concrete floor, with all of my focus and intensity, I pounded hard into that floor, chanting all the while.

This activity remains in my mind as a powerful metaphor for everything that was to come to pass. I still keep a piece of that broken-up concrete floor sitting near my Gohonzon to remind me.

Soon after, I received an offer to dance with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Bill T. Jones has always been a mentor and an inspiration to me. His work is world-renowned for its innovative, provocative athleticism, and I knew in my heart that this could be the right move for my life.

After 11 years in Europe, I moved back to New York. I immediately started rehearsals and began to tour the world, performing in such places as Australia, Japan, the entire United States and Europe.

It was during one of these tours that my mother suffered a severe cerebral hemorrhage — an aneurysm had erupted in her brain — and she was scheduled to have emergency brain surgery the very next day. Arrangements were made so that I could leave the company and travel to Chicago to be with her.

Never before had I been so confronted with fear. My mind created scenarios of her death, when I should have been full of hope. Somehow, I managed to push away these fears, and I ended up chanting for her by her bedside. Later, she told me that she had no recollection of my presence there with her or my chanting.

It wasn't until our New York season at the Joyce Theater (six months later) that I saw my mother fully recovered, moving a little slower but moving nonetheless and looking great.

In my own life, things were getting worse and worse. The dynamic and attitude in the dance company were difficult for me to negotiate. As I traveled, I worried more and more. My role in the company seemed to be constantly changing.

In August 1996, Bill asked if any of us in the company would be willing to commit for the next 18 months. I said yes, and he responded with exhilaration, then promising to allow me to dance a duet as well as a solo in the upcoming New York season.

I was trying to establish my identity as a Jones/Zane dancer and make my career the most important aspect of myself. I had a strategy: I would dance with Bill until 1998 and then pick up where I left off as a teach-er/choreographer.

Well, we all know what happens when we make strategies that are not based on the wisdom of the Lotus Sutra! Three months later, I was let go from the company — boom! There I was, 35 years old, unemployed, in New York City. Where was my fortune, I wondered! What had become of my strategy?

At that time, my mother was back in the hospital for a second brain operation. Now, of

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course, I had plenty of time to be there with her, and this time I was determined for my mother to know that I was there by her bedside. And for her to feel the full effects of my chanting.

I spent my 35th birthday with my mother in the hospital. We had cake. And though I found the whole scene very sad, I turned to my mother and said: “Isn’t this circular? Here we are again, 35 years later, in the hospital together.”

Amazingly, my mom recovered yet again.

Back in New York City, I bought a copy of *Backstage* and began looking at the audition notices. The first time, I quickly threw the magazine in the garbage — I was so ashamed to even be considering one of these “rinky-dink jobs.” Been there, done that. But my fellow Buddhists kept reminding me to keep looking, and they tried to convince me that something better was there for me. “Yeah, right!” I’d reply sarcastically, “Pluto at Disneyworld?”

I tried to support my district and do Gajokai activities, but with the holidays on the way and winter weather, there was always an excuse to do nothing. I wanted to chant a lot, like the two- and three-hour chanting sessions I had done with friends in Munich. I found it difficult to get the support that I needed or to find the motivation within myself.

At that time, my close friend Larry was experiencing great fortune. He was receiving choreographic grants from the American Dance Festival, and he and his new partner were preparing for a New York season. Though I fought to be happy for them, all I could see was how my fortune had been cut off.

My life revolved around going to the gym and collecting unemployment money. And I was beginning to hate dance. I would suck my teeth and feel lost when people would ask: “What are you doing? Why aren’t you dancing with Bill?”

Then, I heard that the new musical *The Lion King* was going into production. I also heard that the choreographer was to be Garth Fagin — someone for whom I have enormous respect and whose dance company is based in my hometown, Rochester, N.Y. In fact, at the very start of my training, I had studied with his company.

The audition was only for Equity eligible or Equity members (i.e., union only). I was neither. And yet somehow the long process of acquiring eligibility was cut short for me — I got my union membership in six minutes rather than in six weeks! This enabled me to meet the requirements to attend the audition scheduled for Jan. 22, 1997 — the exact date, nine-and-a-half years earlier, when I began chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and reciting gongyo.

Naturally, I was nervous when I showed up for the audition. My previous auditions for the musicals *Rent* and *Chicago* had been very humbling experiences.

On top of all that, the day before the audition, I wasn’t feeling well. My doctor told me that I had a temperature of 102, and that I had developed chronic bronchitis. She suggested that I postpone the audition. My response: “I don’t think so.” That was the first time in a long time that I had felt real strength. I thought to myself, “This job must be mine!” So I did a six-hour audition with a fever and a determination.

The days following the audition were the most difficult. I would cry hysterically for no reason. I would sob when my cat showed me signs of affection. I felt vulnerable, scared.

It seemed as though I had no control over my emotions, and in this state chanting was very difficult. I considered the possibility that I was clinically depressed or not right in some way.

After three days, I called a friend, Stacey, who lives in Hamburg, Germany. She basi-

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cally told me that I was far too valuable to be carrying on with tears and drama. She said: “You’ve always managed to overcome your obstacles before. Now pull it together.” A true friend. Golden.

Thanks to friends like Stacey, as well as my fellow SGI members and my fantastic roommate, I began the long climb out of my hellhole. Though I was behind in the rent, my roommate never asked me for money — he trusted me and what I was trying to do with my life. I began to participate in many SGI activities; I did the study portions for our discussion meetings, which proved to be not only enormously successful for the group but also enlightening for me personally.

Doing Gajokai, I remembered my early training in Germany, and I became aware not only of how profound an experience it had been at the time, but also how it had changed my life for the better. For example, protecting the Gohonzon and insuring the safety of members in such places as the Centre Culturelle European in Trets, France, or at the SGI-Germany culture centers in Frankfurt and Bingen, helped me create lifelong bonds with people from all over the world.

The more I chanted, the more the joyous memories of these friendships began to refresh my life. I began to treasure the phenomenal experiences I had had. I remembered what it was like learning to speak German and fighting to find my place in that unfamiliar world.

As a result, I threw myself into my New York Gajokai activities and found a forum there in which to express my appreciation and my difficulties. People began to appear in my life bringing me encouragement, nurturing, humor and love.

Still, I hadn’t heard anything about my audition for *The Lion King*.

One February afternoon, I received notification of my final callback for *The Lion King*. That meant one more month of waiting. As everyone knows, waiting is a time when the inner devils — fear, doubt, anger — step forward and compromise our vision of victory and success. But through Buddhist practice, I found the encouragement I needed to fight these inner subjective functions by taking on an “I refuse to lose” attitude.

The day before my final callback, a friend said to me: “Three letters, one word: J-O-Y. If there’s no joy, then forget it.”

A senior leader said to me: “You must chant so that you transform your innermost life, so that your mere presence is enough. So that those producers or whomever will just have to have you in their show.”

I knew in order to have that kind of life-condition, I would have to chant a lot. I went right home that night and chanted with the determination “I refuse to lose. Let my innermost creativity shine forth powerfully. Let my true self be revealed. All that I am. All that I have, let it be here, right now!”

I’ve always struggled with the concept of winning. I’ve always sabotaged my ability to succeed in one way or another. Quite simply, I had always been afraid to win.

It wasn’t a curse on my life that had kept me from succeeding — it was, quite simply, my lack of courage in myself.

The motto from last year’s March 16 youth division meeting also stayed in my thoughts: “Do You Have the Courage to Follow Your Heart?” Something clicked. I wasn’t helpless. I could change this. Everything around me could be positively influenced by me and by my conviction to follow my heart, no matter what!

My final callback was fantastic. But still, I had another week of waiting before I would know the outcome.

The closer I got to succeeding, the more it seemed that my subjective world was trying

to make me feel I wasn't worthy. One evening, as I led chanting at the New York Culture Center, the sweat gushing off my face, I felt a reserve of strength so powerful it seemed as though some new person had taken possession of my body. All the years of fear and doubt, all the months of effort, all of it had contributed to that moment. I could smash my doubts with thunderous chanting, just as I had with fierce determination broken up that concrete floor back in Germany years before. I chanted that night like never before.

I would no longer accept fear as a reason to not do something!

Do I have the courage to follow my heart? Yes, I do.

After gongyo that night, I called my service. There was a message from Disney Theatrical Productions. I returned the call. Before the casting agent came on the line, I began saying under my breath, "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes." He finally picked up and asked how I was.

"Fine." I replied.

"Well," he said, "You'll be feeling much better after this phone call."

I am currently performing in the Broadway production of *The Lion King* as an original cast member. I am so grateful to all the people who have supported and listened and cared for me through this most difficult and ultimately rewarding time in my life.

As I called my friends and family and fellow members around the world to share my good news, I began to realize how much joy I had brought to others through choosing to share my struggle toward victory. I had raised my awareness of what kosen-rufu really means — a ripple effect, as my own life moves outward with hope and determination to touch the lives of others.

I feel it is our mission to instill this kind of hope in people's lives. I have always known this, yet I never knew what I wanted. By having the chance to experience my life through this Buddhism, I have been unbelievably blessed.

Dreams really can come true. It's only our perception and subsequent strategies that don't allow them to come to fruition. Sabotage is sneaky and tricky.

Discover your limitations, challenge them and win!

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