

## EXPERIENCE — LAURENT COHEN, BARCELONA, SPAIN LIVING LIFE TO IT'S FULLEST

*The following article was translated by Tobias Maxwell, Los Angeles. It first appeared in the French SGI publication Troisieme Civilisation.*

I live in Barcelona where I began to practice four years ago. The year began full of important events — my work with SGI-Spain, organizing the exhibition, “Buddhism and the Environment,” the unexpected death of my mother to cancer, and the news of a baby on the way. In July 1994, I married my girlfriend who was five months pregnant. In August, while visiting my father in Paris, just a few days before an SGI seminar in Trets, I felt a severe abdominal pain.

On my return to Barcelona, I spent two agonizing weeks in search of a diagnosis. When I went to the hospital in emergency, I was diagnosed with cancer of the lymph nodes. I needed to be operated on for a biopsy of the affected ganglions, to get a more specific diagnosis and to choose an effective treatment, which included removing the spleen to prevent the spread of the disease. I was still full of hope, and with the support of my wife and fellow members, I never doubted a quick recovery. I practiced a lot, even taking things with a sense of humor.

The operation, however, had a negative effect on me. The pain in my back persisted and the doctor announced that the biopsies showed no signs of cancerous activity and that the ganglion inflammation was possibly from some infection. I didn't know how to react to the news, unconvinced of the validity of the results. The biopsies were sent to a specialized center, which confirmed the diagnosis but only added to my confusion. Meanwhile I was to be under observation for two months, even though the doctor felt I had succeeded in “evading” the disease. Yet I was troubled, since from the very beginning of this challenge, I had practiced to obtain a clear diagnosis.

In the interim, I had assisted in the birth of our daughter, Africa, and I was given morphine tablets to control my pain. Soon I was free of any medical observation. I was left to fend for myself to discover the source of my back pain — a trek that would entail both conventional and alternative medicine.

One specialist wanted to try “shock-chemotherapy”; unfortunately the lack of researched information on its benefits, as well as my feelings toward the person, kept me searching elsewhere. Buddhism teaches us how subjective these perceptions and feelings can be, and how easily they can change. I kept this in mind as I consulted different therapists, naturopaths and chiropractors. I dabbled in macrobiotics, reflexology, as well as the laying on of hands. Always without results.

My strength was diminishing by now. I was losing my appetite and losing weight perceptively. I was confined to my bed most of the time, waiting for better days. I continued to practice without understanding why my prayers brought no results. I read all I could on Buddhism and sickness, but my confusion remained. To say that I would deepen my faith from this illness or that I would be able to show actual proof while changing my karma was of no consolation. These are difficult concepts to believe in while one is suffering physically. Finally I redid some tests, which showed a cancerous tumor pushing against my gall bladder and causing my horrific pain. I went into the hospital.

I was exhausted but relieved: I had my “clear” diagnosis, even if it was a very bad one.

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“Now I can fight the enemy,” I thought, but I was very weak. I could not eat, nor get up, let alone practice. Everyone was very worried about me.

It’s then that I hit rock bottom, that moment when “the night is so dark the dawn can be nothing but far away.” Despite the sensation that death — my death — was close, so close that I could almost feel its presence, I actually never lost the conviction that I would live, that I had a mission to fulfill in this lifetime. In retrospect, I can honestly say that this was a mystical experience, so strong was my conviction. I managed to tell my wife that she wasn’t to worry, because I KNEW somehow that my time had not yet come and that all this was a kind of proof I had to go through, a step in my human revolution.

Friends and leaders came to visit me. One leader said that SGI President Ikeda was praying for my recovery. That was hard to believe having never met him in person. Although I admired him and his actions, he had remained rather “abstract” to me until that moment. But I was touched by my leader’s concern and sincerity. At that point I remember thinking, “If what we learn in the Soka Gakkai is true, I have no need to fear, because surely President Ikeda, my mentor, is praying for me, although he doesn’t know me and has never seen me.” These words crossed my mind as if they were the truth and I lay at peace, thinking about him.

Of course I did not know the gravity of my condition, but I was convinced that if one were lucid, one knew when the time had come to cross that invisible barrier of death, a barrier that is always there, though we refuse to see it in our everyday lives, living as if we were immortal. I had heard that very old people could feel the moment of their death beforehand. I myself had witnessed the death of another patient who, for several days, had talked about nothing but his fear of death. One morning, I woke up and saw the nurses trying to bring him back with a heart massage. I knew instantly that he wasn’t there anymore. I wanted to tell the nurses: “Leave him alone, the man is just not there.”

After this experience, I was convinced that life surely continued after death in another form, and that there was nothing to be afraid of. I felt that when we had completed our mission in life, we were then able to leave this life at peace with ourselves.

Finally the day of the operation came. I knew it would be a crucial moment and that members of the youth division were praying for me. Much later, my wife told me that the surgeon had been unable to do a thing, since the cancerous mass had invaded my entire abdomen. He had sewn me up after cutting out samples for further biopsies. A sympathetic doctor had told my wife that I was to be given chemotherapy anyway, even if the odds of success were one in a million.

But by now the totality of events had changed something within me. After a few days in and out of consciousness, I woke up on the third day with an appetite and rekindled optimism. I asked my wife to bring me a sandwich. Little by little, with my appetite, I regained my will to live. I still had a long challenge ahead of me before I could be totally cured — two months riddled with obstacles. Still, in the deepest recesses of my self, I felt the worst was over.

Three days later I began chemotherapy and soon the pain disappeared. Every third week I received treatment as an outpatient followed by four days of in-home treatment.

It’s difficult when we’re healthy to imagine our existence reduced to a few square feet of bed and bedroom. How complicated it is when we’ve no strength to get up, to eat, to sleep, to bathe, to urinate, etc. My extreme weakness barely allowed me to speak.

Rather, it was in the silence of night, when the noises of daily life had all receded that

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my conscience manifested itself the most. It was then that I would lock on to things so as not to dwell on my anxiety. Little things, concrete practical objectives: “Tomorrow I’ll read this passage from this book; listen to this piece of music; eat this dish.” To sit on the side of the bed, and then in a few more weeks, take a few steps, and little by little leave my bedroom to go as far as the living room to stretch out on the sofa. To go alone to the bathroom. To read and to draw a little. To feel the beauty of a voice while listening to the words of a favorite song. Certain feelings would make me cry. Seeing my daughter growing. Rejoicing from the love of my wife. Rediscovering tastes. Because it was clear, “he who eats, lives.” I had already observed that at the hospital. Every day there was a victory in the task of my daily life.

Spring arrived and things were going well. Soon I was able to go out in a wheelchair and enjoy the first rays of the sun. During one of my hospital visits, something changed in my doctor’s attitude. When my wife asked what he thought of my progress, he answered matter-of-factly, as if it were the most natural response in the world: “Oh, nothing. He’s on his way to recovery.”

The weeks passed, summer followed spring, and I moved to the coast to take advantage of gardening, the sun and shade, accompanied by my wife, daughter and my mother-in-law.

The illness had provided me with this opportunity to solidify my ties with my family who were there for me throughout. I came to better understand my father who had been ill for a number of years, something I would never have thought possible. I had unexpected contacts with people in my environment — neighbors, people in my area, my social worker. I continued to be supported by my leaders and certain members who visited me regularly and I began to practice vigorously for my final victory.

In August, after a scan to evaluate the results of my treatment, I found out that the tumor was practically all gone. All I had left were a few lesions in my abdomen. We decided to continue the treatment until October. I had recuperated sufficiently enough to take advantage of what was left of the summer. After another month, waiting for the final results, with obstacles all the way through, the doctor told me what I’d been waiting for: “There is no more cancer activity.” (I had chanted so much daimoku for his happiness.) “You can lead a normal life now,” he told me. It was almost too good to believe. In the taxi, on my way home, I smiled inwardly at the sun playing in the trees of the beautiful town I was in. How beautiful life was. Life is so beautiful.

Of course, nothing would ever be the same again. This experience has revolutionized my life, the life of my family and of those around me. It’s too early yet to see the repercussions of this experience on my future. For now, I am filled with gratitude and determination to accomplish my mission on this earth. Like Mr. Ikeda says: “We must try to accomplish our most intimate goals, and if we don’t succeed with them there will be no regrets because we will have tried everything. Life is short, live it to its fullest.”

In Buddhism we learn that faith, practice and study are the three pillars of Buddhism. In my case, at the crucial moment, all I had was faith. Second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda used to say, “The Buddha is life itself.” I cannot explain it, but in that hospital room, it’s exactly what I felt. When I was faced with my own death, my life was reduced to its simplest “essential” faith. To believe in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, in the Buddha that is within us, in what the Daishonin taught, in life. All are aspects of the same thing: faith. This is what I felt.

As to understanding the “why” of my difficult experience; the “why me?” I believe

there is no answer to that. It is undoubtedly the function of karma, and so, pointless to question it further.

What is clear is that life's difficulties are a springboard for our development, as hard as that may seem. The essence of Buddhist practice is not particularly to overcome the sickness as it is to transform it into a treasure, which makes life more meaningful. It's not about enduring a negative state, nor to pass from a negative state to a neutral one, but rather to achieve a very real metamorphosis of the suffering into enlightenment.

"In this way, even illness can stimulate the development of Buddhahood, the ultimate state of life," writes Daisaku Ikeda. "Faith, liberated from everything, means to utilize all difficulties like a springboard for our own development."

In conclusion, I would like to thank all those who shared my experience and who kept me in the coolness of shade with their daimoku.

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