

EXPERIENCE – BOB ZUEHLKE, VIENNA, VA. A KNIGHT TO REMEMBER

Bob Zuehlke fulfills his mission as a diplomat who contributes broadly to world peace through developing friendships around the world.

I have been practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism for 28 years. I have come to the conclusion that my entire life has been building to a crescendo, preparing me for being right here, to accomplish my mission in Northern Virginia. I am going to touch upon two aspects to my life that I consider tremendous inconspicuous benefits. First, I have confidence that I belong where I am, in the geographic sense. It seems like most of my life I always felt "If only this changed," "if only that changed," "if only I could get out of home and away from my mother," "if only I had a job where I could use my intellect," "if only my wife understood me," "if only I had a lot of money." My wife, Yuko, and I have had the good fortune to live in several countries and continue to have friendships with people around the globe. Just to realize there is nowhere else in the world and no other people I need to be around than you right now is a great benefit. Second, I feel that my Buddhist practice has brought me rhythm to solve nagging medical problems by being in the right place at the right time.

First, let me talk about the geographic perspective.

I could not possibly have envisioned the mission I had when I started practicing Buddhism at age 19 in the small town of Jackson, Mich., where my sponsor and I were the first members. I was a hippie and had just dropped out of college. As soon as I started practicing, however, lots of our friends started, as well. It was as if with my first gongyo, a huge wave welled up and I feel that I have been a surfboard riding the tip of the wave ever since.

Nine months after I started practicing, a couple dozen of our friends had already received the Gohonzon. I was then offered a full-time job in Lansing with the United States Postal Service. I had been going to activities six days a week and suddenly I was working evening shift with split days off and alone. I realized that either my practice would slowly weaken or else I would have to make a very strong, deeper determination. I wrestled in front of the Gohonzon in Lansing and pulled out the determination to stand up and DO IT!? That transformation, I am convinced, determined the course of the rest of my life. By consistently introducing people to this Buddhism, in time others joined and moved to the area; eventually a group, district, chapter, and multiple chapters developed in that area.

After getting married and starting a family, I went back to school full time while working full time, with the determination to start off in a new career direction. The postal pay was pretty good but I wanted a job in which I could use my intellect more and contribute more broadly somehow to world peace. After getting my degree, I passed the Foreign Service selection process, to be among the 175 people who got jobs from the more than 22,000 examinees the year I took the exam. I really felt that to overcome those odds was part of my mission. So, on Jan. 1, 1984, I drove away from Michigan with my wife and three sons, saying goodbye to that chapter of my life.

Following nine months of training in Washington, D.C., my first assignment was in Zurich. In Switzerland, we had the pleasure of practicing with members from many dif-

ferent countries. The dialogue we shared with people from so many cultures helped us more deeply appreciate the universality of this practice. Next in Hong Kong, I became the district chief of the district for English-speaking members. Our district made a very significant contribution to the 9th SGI Youth Culture Festival and was able to welcome SGI President Ikeda on behalf of the members. In Bangkok, I helped a Thai district for four years, which enabled me to get to know many ordinary Thai people from different parts of society in ways that none of my fellow diplomats were able. We really loved living in Thailand. We found Thai people and culture to be particularly charming and graceful. In coordination with the SGI-Thai leadership, I also formed a group for English-speaking members. Our Rainbow Group was vibrant, with members from 14 different countries.

Following Bangkok, we were in the Philippines for the two years immediately before coming here. We were fortunate during that time President Ikeda opened the Grand Peace Culture Center, a splendid training center overlooking a vast volcanic lake that contains within it another mountain peak that has a volcanic lake in it. President Fidel Ramos welcomed President Ikeda to the Philippines on behalf of the fraternal order, the Knights of Rizal. Around this time, I became interested in this group, dedicated to humanistic social action on behalf of people suffering from injustice. As a diplomat, I have met many prominent people and politicians, but a certain percentage is clearly arrogant and focused on self-advancement. I found the Knights to be refreshingly humble, despite, for the most part, being people from prestigious positions in government, business and society. Through the Knights of Rizal, I was able to meet Dr. Henry Kissinger and King Juan Carlos of Spain, who were honored by the group during my time there. Kissinger, by the way, surprised me for the fervor with which he expressed his respect for President Ikeda, after I casually brought up the subject in conversation. How ironic, I thought, that Bob the hippie all these years later in Manila would be talking with Henry Kissinger, whom I considered a monster for his support of the Vietnam War, and about Buddhism of all things!

As a result of this involvement, the Knights benighted me. They invited me to New York this past Memorial Day weekend to address their international meeting. My talk followed a great personal message from President Ikeda to the assembly. I was also able to accompany the senior knights on a tour of the SGI New York Culture Center.

Now, let me briefly touch upon the physical breakthroughs to which I alluded earlier. *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* points out that as we continue our practice, each of our senses become purified. I have experienced this.

First, taste and touch. In the early '70s, I had a few bouts with a rare and painful malady in which many of my mucous membrane cells died and caused open raw blisters, making even breathing tortuous. Fortunately, I happened upon a doctor in Michigan who had seen this syndrome twice and knew how to treat it with steroids, even though he knew no name for it. Subsequently, I have not had that problem again.

Second, smell. I had recurring sinus infections since high school. A British doctor we met in Hong Kong in the late '80s specialized in a unique type of sinus surgery, rebuilding my sinus passageways, which eliminated the sinus infections and cured the problem.

Third, although not really affecting one of the senses, I developed sleep apnea. My wife noticed about three years ago I stopped breathing while sleeping at night. I was able to recognize the symptoms because my mother had the disorder; the University of Michigan identified the problem while I was on leave two years ago and prescribed a treatment before I had a stroke or heart attack, which many people suffer as a result of untreated apnea.

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Fourth, sight. In Manila, I was able to have my distance vision corrected with laser surgery, essentially for free. I now see 20/15 in both eyes after wearing glasses since fifth grade. And finally, hearing. In early June this year, I had surgery to replace the bones in my inner ear, which has restored the hearing I had lost in my left ear over the past 15 years. My Buddhist practice has enabled me to be in the right place at the right time to take advantage of the advancement of medical science.

So, here I am in Northern Virginia. Certainly, by no means am I claiming to be a completed work of art physically. However, I have had firsthand experience seeing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism help people from many different cultures. I have come to view Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and this Buddhist practice as sunshine, fertilizer and rainwater, which enables all human life to thrive.

My family and I look forward to the opportunity to share more of our experiences in the coming months and to learn from the members here, whom we like and respect, which is itself a benefit. I have many struggles and challenges in my life now. I am determined to follow the example of the bulbs and seeds we planted in our garden in spring — to take in the rainwater and sunshine, learn to enjoy the dirt and grow further.

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