

EXPERIENCE – LILLIAN WILNER, SPRING GREEN, WIS. THE KEY IS INNER REVOLUTION

Lillian Wilner shares how a change in life-condition based on her Buddhist practice freed her from an unhappy marriage and the Hepatitis C virus.

We were both young in faith, not knowing how to properly lead meetings and encourage people. It was a struggle to find others to practice with, however we were determined to hold meetings twice a week and chant two hours a day.

This is how I began my practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in 1975, as a pioneer along with one other person in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. We met in Montreal and moved to Edmonton to join the Alberta Ballet Company. While touring with the ballet company, we were forced to chant together a lot. In this way we overcame many of our differences, did human revolution and eventually united more in our efforts. Because of this, it wasn't long before two, three, and four other people began to practice. Within two years we were made a district and in six years a chapter.

I've overcome many problems and difficult situations since I began practicing this Buddhism. One such problem was being married to an on-again, off-again drug addict and alcoholic whom I supported financially most of the time. After 10 years of marriage and eight years of chanting, he had grown increasingly negative about my Buddhist practice. His drug and alcohol problem led him to paranoid and violent episodes, occasionally threatening, with a knife in hand, to go out and kill someone. He insisted that I had to go with him; I chanted desperately inside with all my heart and somehow it would never happen.

Based on encouragement I received while on a training course in Japan, I chanted to become the best wife in the world. But the more I chanted and no matter how hard I tried, my husband became more negative.

At wit's end and out of fear for my life, I chanted to be with someone with whom I could work for world peace, and if indeed it was this man, I had to know! Almost immediately my prayer was answered, although I didn't realize it right away. He approached me about getting a legal separation. His reason was because he wasn't working and didn't want to work; he would go on welfare and file for bankruptcy on his overcharged credit card. We both agreed with the intentions of getting back together. However, as soon as he moved out, I realized that my prayer was being answered.

Within two weeks I went out with a man whom, after our second date, I knew would be my future husband. Four years later we were married. He tells me almost every day that I'm the best wife in the world. We share a wonderful and special relationship. Sheldon fully supports my Buddhist practice.

Today we are living in beautiful Spring Green, Wis., 40 miles west of Madison — our home for almost 10 years. I have my own school of ballet and my husband is managing director of an outdoor classical theatre, the American Players Theatre.

Two years ago, I received a letter from my ex-husband's wife informing me that he recently died from the Hepatitis C virus. I knew he had Non-A, Non-B hepatitis, but it never occurred to me that I could get it. A month later, I tested positive for Hepatitis C. I was shocked and scared! The only thing I knew about the virus was that my ex-husband

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had just died from it at age 49.

As I researched, I discovered that in the United States, an estimated 4 million people are infected, and 2,000 more people die each year from Hepatitis C than from AIDS. It is also the number one cause of liver transplants in the United States. Even though it is such a great health threat, I was amazed to learn how little people — physicians included — know about it.

Hepatitis C is an insidious virus that has the ability to change its form frequently. Often, the immune system can't keep up with identifying and destroying all the mutations it makes, leaving the virus free to multiply. The liver is its favorite place to live causing, among other things, cirrhosis, liver cancer and liver failure. It can take decades before any symptoms occur and by then the liver damage is substantial.

At a district meeting, I made a determination that in one year I would completely clear the virus from my blood. To help me in my determination, I turned to a writing by Nichiren Daishonin called "The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra." In the letter, the Daishonin says, "No matter how earnestly Nichiren prays for you, if you lack faith, it will be like trying to set fire to wet tinder. Spur yourself to muster the power of faith. Regard your survival as wondrous. Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before any other. Then, just as the sutra says, 'All enemies are crushed'" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 246).

In the explanation to the letter, there's a quote from former President Makiguchi which reads, "We often hear experiences of members who have recovered from illness, but, that much is a matter of course. Rather than merely enabling a recovery from illness, our faith should allow us to change the workings of illness into some positive benefit or growth." I decided that the key was to do an inner revolution, to really change something inside my life. I also read an experience from a women's division member who had struggled with tuberculosis. She had chanted for three hours a day to be cured and her condition only worsened. When she went for guidance, she was told, "Faith is not a business transaction, it's not 'Let's Make a Deal.'" She was told that the bacteria in her body were in the life-condition of Animality. She had to raise her life condition higher, to that of the Buddha, then she would be cured.

Reading this, I immediately recognized that the virus in my body existed in the state of Anger. For several years I have struggled on and off with a relationship at work that has progressively worsened. I determined to face the situation head on. I began to notice that when I was feeling really stressed out and upset about the situation I would experience pain in my right side by the liver. I realized that my low life-condition was contributing to the Hepatitis C.

This was an incredible awakening. I began to chant about my work relationship and the Hepatitis virus as if they were definitely connected. I saw overcoming my ill feelings as the direct link to clearing out the virus. Besides doing my usual morning and evening prayers, I began chanting inside all the time, in the car, whenever I could.

It was extremely difficult for me to remember that this situation was entirely my responsibility. Every fiber of my being wanted to rebel against that thought. One minute I would tell myself, "She's so arrogant, I have every right to be upset," or "she's so mean to me, why should I be nice to her?" Then I would remind myself that everything in my environment was a reflection of my life and that I needed to change myself from within.

Every bone in my body resisted, but eventually I started seeing her suffering and was able to feel some compassion for her life. I felt like I was cleaning dirt out of my life. I

think I've gone deeper into my life than ever and I'm beginning to understand what courage really is. In "The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra" it also says, "A coward cannot have any of his prayers answered" (MW-1, p. 246). President Ikeda also says about courage, "whether or not you have courage will determine your happiness or unhappiness in life." I realized it takes much more courage to face the demons within than the demons outside us. I've also come to the conclusion that doing human revolution can sometimes be a painful process, but it surely leads to absolute happiness.

In the process of all this, my doctor wanted to do a liver biopsy. I was tested every two months for a particular liver enzyme that could indicate liver damage. In the past, I had two slightly elevated readings. I was very reluctant to have a biopsy and was chanting that I would not have to have one. In the mean time, he decided to retest my P.C.R., which indicates how much virus is in the blood.

Much to my doctor's amazement and my own, my P.C.R. test came back negative, which means I've completely cleared the virus from my blood. I feel such incredible appreciation for my Buddhist practice and to the SGI for the encouragement I received. Apparently, the virus can still be harboring in my liver, so this ordeal may not be over yet. The doctor said I have to test negative for three consecutive years in a row before he will say I am completely cured. I am determined to continue to do human revolution, work for world peace and be 100 percent clear of the virus by the year 2001.

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