

TRANSCENDING HER LESSER SELF

While attending an interfaith conference, Shelley Fine is reminded of the importance of prayer and sharing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

I recently had an opportunity to experience the joy of sharing Buddhism at an interfaith conference I attended through work in Kansas City, Mo. As a social worker for the Family Friends Project, I was sent as the representative of our program. In retrospect, however, it seemed like I was really there representing the SGI.

The national coordinators of the conference had asked for participants to lead worship services in the various denominations that would gather there. I submitted a proposal introducing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, the SGI and President Ikeda. It was accepted, and so, armed with 10 copies of *The Winning Life*, the *World Tribune*; *Living Buddhism*, brochures about the "Linus Pauling and the Twentieth Century" exhibit and a copy of the *Introduction to SGI* videotape, I traveled to the barbecue rib capital of the world.

One of the things I love about the SGI is meeting members from around the country, and being able to immediately connect on a deep level because of our shared Buddhist practice. Upon arriving at the Hilton, I called the Kansas City Community Center and was given the name of a district leader who lived near the hotel. She warmly invited me to her district to chant. I was excited and nervous about the worship service the next morning, but speaking with this fellow SGI member gave me strength and confidence.

That night I stayed up late reading the publications, furiously taking notes and trying to cram the spirit of Buddhism into my head. The meeting was to begin at 8:30 a.m. the next day. In preparation I chanted and arrived early for the service. The room assigned to me seated 160 people; rather intimidating, I thought. But, no matter. I was on a mission and I was ready! Or so I thought.... I set up the VCR — no easy feat for this electronically challenged bodhisattva. I laid out the publications, and now all I needed were the participants. At 8:25 a.m., I still had no takers, so I decided to venture out to the hallway. There I saw a crowd walking my way. Anticipation raced through me. I asked if they were looking for the Buddhist service. "No," they said, they were looking for the Catholic service. "Oh," I replied, still smiling, and then promptly gave them directions to that service. I must have given directions to 35 people to attend Catholic prayer that morning. "Surely, someone will wander into this room," I assured myself, unconvincingly. There were eight services going on simultaneously: Zen, Mahayana, Protestant, Baptist, Jewish, Islamic and the aforementioned Catholic. By 8:45 a.m., I realized that no one was coming to mine. Shocking! Echoing in my ears was the refrain: "What if you gave a worship service and nobody came?" Literally in tears, I sat there and chanted, nibbling my blueberry muffin.

When the coordinator discovered that no one had come, she, too, was surprised and asked if I would offer the service again the next day. I was happy to do so, but also realized I was now going to be nervous for another 24 hours. During the day, however, I had wonderful conversations about Buddhism with a couple of 20-something-year-olds. I couldn't help but see them as "youth division" and shared with them the power of Buddhism to transform suffering into growth and happiness. By the end of the night, they said they couldn't wait to hear more about Buddhism at the service the next morning.

I realized that I needed to go deeper in my prayer for the experience I wanted to create for others. My prayer needed to transcend my lesser self — “Is this presentation going to be ok?” — to my greater self — “How can I encourage these individuals about the beauty of Buddhism?” That morning, I reached out to SGI President Ikeda through my chanting and pledged that, since he couldn’t be in Kansas City, I would represent him and the SGI. I determined to do this and dove into my courage and resolve. I chanted to come from my heart and touch others’ hearts, and to speak with the voice of the Buddha.

Upon entering the much cozier room assigned to me this time, I felt unbelievably happy, expectant and confident. By 8:20 a.m., people started coming in, until there were 15. Sitting in a semi-circle, I welcomed everyone. You can imagine how thrilled I was to see them, given the debacle of the morning before. I played the *Introduction to SGI* tape and felt proud to be a member of this incredible organization. After answering some pretty tricky theoretical questions as best as I could and sharing a little of my own experience, the roomful of guests and I chanted for five minutes. Afterward, people approached me to find out how they could contact the SGI in their own city. All the publications I had laid out were gone.

During the meeting, I was aware of one particular woman, Beth, whom I sensed was in some kind of turmoil. She came up to me afterward and shared that she had been a practicing Lutheran all her life but that she had reached an impasse in her faith and in her life. Through her tears Beth stated: “I want to learn how to operate from the core of my being.” I believed her strong seeking spirit had led her from West Virginia to Kansas City to meet a woman from California in order to discover *the way in* to her core. We talked for an hour. I invited her to the district meeting that night. Beth had an intuitive understanding that her life would benefit more from a Buddhist meeting than the barbecue dinner she’d already paid for.

Conni, a 30-year member and district leader, took us to her meeting. There we met sincere members who spontaneously turned their chanting session into an introductory meeting for us. Beth chanted 30 minutes. After the meeting, we sipped margaritas with Conni and Barbara, another 30-year member. Laughing and listening to hilarious, yet profoundly encouraging experiences from these long-time members, Beth’s face actually transformed before our eyes. Back at the hotel at midnight, I said to her, “Can you believe that we just met this morning?” Exhausted but exhilarated, we laughed and hugged and agreed it had been a most amazing day.

At home again in West Virginia, Beth is chanting a little every day now, reading President Ikeda’s guidance, and is looking forward to attending a meeting soon. She is experiencing the hope, revitalization and creativity that tapping into her Buddha nature inspires. This experience shines in my life as it reminded me that digging deep in one’s prayer is the basis for all transformation. Opening and extending one’s heart and in the process developing new relationships is one of the great joys of this practice. I am forever appreciative to be surrounded by new and experienced members, and for having a mentor in life who is teaching me the victory dance.

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