

REALIZING MY BIGGEST DREAMS

I am a professional drummer, and after working for 10 years in Oregon, I moved to New York in September 1986 because I wanted to advance my career and improve my drumming skills. I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism by my drumming teacher, Mike Clark, five weeks after I arrived. I experienced incredible benefits and quickly came to appreciate the practice and the SGI.

Along with the benefits came the obstacles, including a major illness, several sour relationships and severe financial straights. At one point, I was eight months behind on my rent.

In January 1990, I made the determination to find out about the mentor–disciple relationship, which I had heard repeatedly was the essence of Buddhist practice. For some time I had been feeling at a loss for someone to look up to as a great example of character, integrity and wisdom that could inspire me. I decided to read SGI President Ikeda's novel *The Human Revolution*. I was awestruck by the degree that the youthful Daisaku Ikeda struggled to reply to his mentor, second SGI president, Josei Toda. I quickly gained tremendous trust and respect for him and was experiencing great results in applying his guidance to my daily life.

This determination proved to be a major turning point for my Buddhist practice and for my life. I got a day job, my first music teaching job in New York and met my wife all in that year. I was deeply appreciative.

At the close of 1990, the priesthood issue broke out. Nichiren Shoshu High Priest Nikken Abe, made a series of false accusations about President Ikeda in what I came to clearly see was an attempt to bring all SGI members under his control in a state of subserviency. In short, they were out to defame President Ikeda and destroy the SGI, the very things that had become the most precious to my life. This prompted me to seriously read Nichiren Daishonin's writings in order to clarify exactly what constituted correct faith and practice.

What I learned was that the priesthood's actions perfectly matched the type of people described in the Lotus Sutra that would appear to obstruct the advancement of kosen-rufu. One passage that stuck in my mind reads: "Something uncommon also occurs when an ordinary person attains Buddhahood. At such a time, the three obstacles and the four devils will invariably appear, and the wise will rejoice while the foolish will retreat" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2, p. 288).

I began to make further efforts to deepen my understanding of this issue and to educate others.

By 1994, at 39, I was feeling a sense of a lack of accomplishment in my life. Also, realizing that faith equals daily life, I wanted to show much greater actual proof in society, while continuing to deepen my understanding of the mentor–disciple relationship. I came across President Ikeda's guidance that stated: "Everyone wants to shine, to be the best they possibly can. How do we achieve this? By struggling against the one fundamental evil that dwells in our lives. By that, I mean struggling with the key issue that lies at the root of all our problems.

"In our human revolution, too, each of us has "one fundamental evil"—one basic fault—that stands in the way of our personal growth. Some of you may think you have

many faults, but in most cases, all those faults derive from one fundamental fault—for instance, cowardice, or rudeness, or sentimentality, or a short temper, and the list goes on.

“We must become aware of that fundamental fault or evil in our lives, chant with all our hearts and take thorough action to overcome it. This is the practice of human revolution. We will achieve no progress as long as we just float through life aimlessly. Practice is what counts. If we can overcome our fundamental fault, everything will open up dramatically. We will shine. And even tendencies that we previously thought of as failings will be illuminated as strengths.”

This really hit home and I realized that I need to win over my own weakness. I was lacking the courage and confidence to directly pursue the things that would enable me to find fulfillment in life. Also, I saw that I was living on the edge of society, hesitating to jump into the thick of things. I realized that I would have changed this if I wanted to show the kind of actual proof that I now sought. I realized I must make a plan of action and follow through, without retreating.

I had been studying at a music school in East Harlem when the Director of Jazz studies encouraged me to enroll at Empire State College for a bachelor’s degree. I had never considered going back to school, but having a daughter made me think about it seriously. I applied and received two grants that covered 100 percent of my tuition and expenses.

Again the obstacles appeared one after another as if to test my resolve. Back in 1991, my mother had been diagnosed with bone cancer and was expected to live only a month or so. I chanted a lot for her and she extended her life by three years. One month after I started college, my studies were abruptly interrupted when she took a sudden turn for the worse and plunged toward the brink of death.

I took an emergency flight to Hawaii, where she was living, and as I managed to chant 50 hours in 10 days, she made a stunning comeback. I stayed with her for three weeks. All along I had chanted for her to have no pain. I knew my prayers were being answered when she told me during this visit, “bone cancer is supposed to be excruciatingly painful, but with what I’ve experienced, I can say this is really no big deal.”

Our family became much closer during this time and a number of deep conflicts were resolved. Six months later, my mother passed away peacefully.

I decided to challenge myself to get a master’s degree in jazz performance at Queens College. I applied and was accepted. Throughout this time I also managed to fulfill my responsibilities as a men’s division leader. I finished my bachelor’s degree in September ’97, just days before the first day of classes.

Our second daughter was born one month later. I was working at three music schools, playing gigs, going to school full time and struggling with insomnia. It was torture but the efforts I had made to study about the temple issue had given me a better understanding about the nature and significance of obstacles—and I remembered my determination not to retreat.

I never missed a day of work or school and successfully completed my first year. However I lost one of my teaching jobs, so I took a job in a show in Virginia over the summer. While I was away, my wife faxed my updated resume to several school districts. The day that New York City schools opened, I was not employed, but by that afternoon I had a full time job with full benefits for my family at Public School 80, an elementary school in Queens.

More than 75 percent of the students were from broken homes and came to school with a multitude of problems. The atmosphere was very intense and volatile. Fights would fre-

quently break out in the classroom and the vice principal would scream at the children through a bullhorn all day long. In short, everyday was extremely stressful and challenging. I began to wake up at 5:30 a.m. to chant an hour for life-force and wisdom to deal with the situation. Even so, by 3:00 p.m. I felt like a towel that someone had squeezed dry with all their might—and then I would go to attend the three-hour-long classes at Queens College.

The mid-terms that came at the end of March demanded intense amounts of energy. I did extremely well but when I finished with them, I was totally exhausted. The following passage from President Ikeda's revised poem, "Youth, Scale the Mountain of Kosen-rufu of the 21st Century" encouraged me as I threw myself into completing my finals and gave me the the energy to cross the finish line: "You must ascend,/ Step by step,/ And one by one,/ The mountains large and small,/ That confront you each day./ For the value of a deeply fulfilling youth/ Can be found only in the lives/ Of those who strive to conquer/ The treacherous mountains of life and society/ Only by pursuing this path/ That you have deeply resolved to follow/ Can you develop with quiet strength/ A self as inexpressibly vast and boundless/ As an infinite field,/ And thereby lead a life of unshakable confidence!"

In my 12 years of Buddhist practice, I managed to recognize that all of these challenges were, in fact, a direct response to my determination to win over my own weakness and to build the kind of inner strength that enabled me to realize my biggest dreams. I can say that I am proud to have my master's degree, but my true treasure is the struggle that I went through. Having a great mentor in life has enabled me to grow and achieve my goals far beyond what I would have without one.

In closing, I'd like to express my appreciation to my wife and children and my SGI leaders and fellow members for their continuous support.