

EXPERIENCE—CHRIS CONLEY, SEATTLE LIKE A RIVER THAT SHAPES THE LAND

Since Chris Conley began his Buddhist practice just a year ago, he reshaped his entire life.

What a difference a year makes. Exactly a year ago July 25, I received the Gohonzon. At that ceremony, my fellow district members were present to give me support and a standing ovation. A women's division leader said to me that my life would get better and better every year from now on. I simply agreed but didn't fully realize the truth in her words—or the effort that it would take.

Before I started practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, my life had its ups and downs. I felt like my life was in a constant cycle of joy and anger. I couldn't figure out how to stop my negativity and self-doubt. It was as if my life were a scene in a snow globe. I wanted to see my life clearly but didn't realize that I kept shaking things up to hide my life from my own eyes. I was responsible for making the snow cover the scene. When difficult situations arose, my solution was to quit my job and move somewhere else.

A month before receiving the Gohonzon, I determined to do gongyo and chant every morning and evening. I said to myself, "If this is going to be my life, I might as well do gongyo from this day forward until the day I die." And so I have. Within three weeks of that determination, I interviewed and was offered a job on the spot for a full-time position teaching ESL and computers to adult immigrants. It is not easy to find a full-time position teaching ESL. Most jobs are volunteer or part time.

Once at my new position, I realized that I was at a company that had the philosophy that I wanted, but I was put right back into the same situation that I had always run from. I had an oppressive supervisor who harassed anyone who wouldn't support her ideas. By chanting and reading the *World Tribune* and other SGI books, I realized that this was my karma and that I was responsible for attracting such circumstances. I was sending out messages through my behavior and words.

In the past, I usually worked at my job, got frustrated and moved on. I decided that if I was responsible for this, then I had to change it. I put this Buddhist practice to use by trying to change myself and my decisions, so that I wouldn't run from this situation and that I could gain from it instead.

I made a few goals and determinations. First, I made the determination to stay with this company for at least three years no matter what. This totally changed my focus of problem solving. I couldn't get upset and burn bridges. I had to be positive and maintain a good relationship with everyone at work. I had to develop a sense of commitment and compassion to my company and co-workers like I never had before.

Also, I was determined to develop the trust of my supervisor. If I was going to work here for at least three years, I needed to establish a good relationship with her. Finally, I was determined to change my negative behavior and thoughts by chanting one hour a day and throwing myself into SGI activities. I needed to change my anger, my ego and my selfishness into something positive.

At first it was hard. I found it difficult to fit one hour of chanting and to attend various meetings into my schedule. It wasn't that I didn't have the time, it was mostly my selfish nature to do what I want in the evenings. It was difficult to keep this selfish nature con-

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trolled. But I tried to put my faith in the practice first, and trust that it would work just as it had worked for getting my job. I also kept the idea of kosen-rufu in my mind when I felt selfish. Akemi, my girlfriend at the time, taught me that if I do something for the peace and welfare of others, it is a good thing. This helped me to continue chanting and to strengthen my connection to the SGI-USA organization.

As I attended more meetings, I really began to see how the process of creating and carrying out such activities was training for my own human revolution. By going through the struggle of making phone calls, planning activities, creating displays and carrying out the activities, I was building relationships with wonderful people and training myself to be less selfish and more compassionate toward others. I chanted for people so that they would make it to the activity. I really started to care about the people in my district and to chant for their happiness. I expanded this to other important people such as my family, friends, students and co-workers. I eventually decided that I wanted to chant for my supervisor to be happy.

Slowly things started to change at work. I found many people would come to me to talk about their troubles—even my boss. I put my effort into listening to them and I allowed them to express themselves. Most of the time, while they were talking, they would solve their own problems.

Within six months of being hired (and chanting for my co-workers and supervisor), I was promoted to ESL coordinator, a position that I was determined to create since no one was taking care of these classes and students. Three months later, I was promoted to assistant to the director!

The other day, my boss practiced a speech in front of me. I encouraged her to be positive, to be a role model of what she wanted to change within the company. Afterward, she said that she felt much calmer, more positive. I have gained her trust.

My attitude toward my director changed dramatically during this year. I went from being scared of her and trying to hide from her, to seeing her as a person with a great drive to be the best that she could. Although my boss has her weaknesses, I saw her sincerity, and I can now chant for her at a deeper level.

As a result of my efforts to chant and take action regarding my supervisor and co-workers, I've met two people at work that used to be SGI-USA members. I brought one of these former members to a World Peace Prayer Meeting that was just awesome. She met people that she hadn't seen in 10 years. She even brought her altar out and started chanting and doing gongyo. Two other workers have asked me questions about Buddhism and I've been able to teach them about Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and its meaning.

Definitely the greatest change I've seen in myself through chanting and taking action to change my life is my focus to help people.

I've chanted to have more young men's division in my district. As I've been able to handle more responsibility, they have popped out of the woods to ask questions about Buddhism, attend meetings and learn gongyo. There are now about seven new young men learning to chant in my district, five of whom are in junior high or high school.

I heard on the radio once that many adults don't know or have contact with kids these days, as many couples are choosing not to have kids. That was me. But I wanted to change and to get to know and help the youth in my community. I really want to carry out President Toda's and Ikeda's spirit by raising the youth of this country because they are the future.

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Since I feel my mentors' spirits within my heart, I made a new determination to offer any junior high or high school division member my help. On two occasions, I have been called to help with emergency situations. These young men have taught me a lot about the world that they are growing up in. I admire their struggles and applaud their efforts to change their lives. Akemi and I have taken the kids hiking, helped them set up lemonade stands, watched videos together and have visited their homes in order to establish a trusting relationship.

Over the past year, I've received a lot of benefits for my efforts at changing my negative karma: Akemi became my wife; we bought a car to take members to meetings; we bought our first house; I've been promoted twice; my boss is happier; and I have many great people in my life; and we're going to have a baby. But the greatest benefit is seeing people succeed. While I fight my negative tendencies, I can help others do the same. I may get material benefits, but what gives me goose bumps is seeing others that I've helped become happier. This is the real benefit that I've learned.

My favorite passage from Nichiren Daishonin is: "Suffer what there is to suffer; enjoy what there is to enjoy and continue chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" (The *Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 161). These encouraging words tell me that what I may be suffering or enjoying will pass. But gongyo, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and my faith in them will always give me a sturdy philosophy of life, like a river that shapes the land.