

EXPERIENCE—ARTHUR CONGDON, PHILADELPHIA MY BIGGEST INTERNAL STRUGGLE

I was 17 when a friend introduced me to Buddhism. One thing that impressed me was that he was a pretty average guy, but I could see that he was also someone who based his life on deep principles that he put into action. I wasn't involved in any religion at the time, and I wasn't planning on joining one. I had ideals, but there was no way that I knew of to actualize them in my own life. Then, when I heard about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, I realized that its principles closely matched mine. So, strange as chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo seemed at the time, if it would enable me to translate these principles into something concrete and meaningful in my life, it was worth checking out.

After chanting for a few weeks, I started to feel more confident about myself, and my ideals didn't seem so theoretical anymore. I felt like I could set realistic goals and actually achieve them. And with time and persistent Buddhist practice, I saw concrete results.

Just when I started to see the change in my life from chanting, I heard about gongyo, and I was slightly taken aback. I'm visually impaired and physically unable to hold a book, so I couldn't just read it like everyone else. The prospect of memorizing parts of the Lotus Sutra that weren't even in English was a big commitment. But having heard many times that "Buddhism is reason," I figured that there must be something to gongyo if SGI members do it twice a day. So I decided to go for it, memorizing one line per day. After going at this pace for a year, I got impatient, so one weekend in the spring of 1997 I determined to memorize the rest of the last eight pages of part B.

Learning gongyo has given me good practice in applying myself to study. I'm a third-year physics major at Temple University in Philadelphia. Because I'm quadriplegic, I need to hire people to do the physical tasks of reading and writing, and by my second year the material was becoming so technical that I needed readers who had a background in physics.

I had help once a week from a friend who is a physicist, but I needed more time than that. At that point my mother, who started practicing Buddhism at the same time I did, reminded me of the line in *The New Human Revolution* in which Shin'ichi Yamamoto encourages a member by saying, "You have the Gohonzon, haven't you?" I got the point, and started chanting with the determination to find the right help before I got too far behind.

Around that time, my mother got a call from an old friend who mentioned in passing that she'd run into Jeff, a former high school classmate who had a degree in physics from Cornell. He was now working at a local mall. That same night, my mom went there and asked around until she found Jeff at a calendar stand in the middle of the mall. Jeff, who lives barely three minutes down the road from me, has been working with me for a year. He's enabled me to keep up with my studies. At the same time, we've become good friends. I know that it was my determination and sincere chanting for this goal that gave me the wisdom to recognize and take advantage of the opportunity to study with Jeff.

I gradually began to recognize how my circumstances were improving through my Buddhist practice. But I knew that the only way I could become truly happy was to make a fundamental change from within. My sister, Gwyn, who overcame severe depression through her own efforts and Buddhist practice, truly inspired me and proved that anyone

can overcome whatever negative karma they have, no matter how immutable it seems or how long it's been there.

My biggest internal struggle, for as long as I can remember, has been anger that would flare up whenever an unexpected or difficult situation would arise. Once, I screamed curses for 10 minutes because I burned my tongue on hot tea. I vowed to overcome my volatility many times, but I never seemed to make headway. I didn't pay enough attention to T'ien-t'ai's statement "As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils will emerge... you should be neither frightened nor influenced by them" ("Letter to the Brothers," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 501).

Rather than moving on and making a fresh determination, I would make things even worse by loudly berating myself in front of my friends and family for having gotten angry. I would yell incessant strings of apologies interspersed with colorful language. Obviously, this really wasn't the best way to overcome anger. I became more bitter and frustrated than ever. Every time I blew up, my mom and Gwyn would politely suggest that I might try chanting. At first, this only fueled my outbursts. But I would eventually grumble my way to the Gohonzon. I know I've steadily improved, but I haven't totally defeated my anger yet. I am determined that now is the time to fully break through my anger. For the first time, I have complete confidence in my ability to do so.

I know that I have not struggled alone, though, and I want to express my sincere appreciation to all the SGI members who have encouraged me through their own lives. I'd like to end with a line from a rap written by two Philadelphia young men who are members: "The moment you're defeated is the time to win!" With this kind of spirit, I know I won't be swayed by any setback and can advance toward my dreams.