

## **EXPERIENCE—GWYNETH CONGDON, PHILADELPHIA WINNING OVER HOPELESSNESS**

If I had not decided to practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, I would probably not be alive now to share my experience.

Until I finally had complete victory over it this past summer, I lived with severe depression, which began in my early childhood.

I have always been very sensitive. Growing up in a dangerous housing project in Philadelphia proved too much for me. Every time I witnessed some act of disrespect, some violation of human dignity, ranging from people yelling at each other to hearing gunshots, my feelings would be badly hurt. I was a 3-year-old child steadily filling with rage at the world for being in such a cruel place to live.

I knew from how much my family loved me that there is always good in the world, that people are as capable of love as they are of hate. But seeing the frequency with which people chose hate over love only made this realization more painful. Even as I grew physically, I was emotionally and spiritually suffocating in my own rage and despair. By the time I started school, I had given up looking for hope.

I went to Catholic school because I am visually impaired and St. Lucy's offered visual support services as well as the opportunity for its students to be mainstreamed in regular classes at another Catholic school across the street. I learned to compensate for my visual impairment there, but the religious indoctrination I received set my hopelessness in concrete. I learned that especially because I wasn't Catholic, I wasn't good enough, I wasn't smart enough, and doggone it, God didn't like me. I already felt doomed. And now I learned that a major world religion agreed with me on that point.

I was still angry. So much needed to be done to make the world a better place, and I felt obliged, as a human being, to make a positive contribution. But I felt utterly powerless, completely unable to make a dent in the huge, miserable system that I was trapped in. My anger eventually became directed inward, and I started to hate myself for my powerlessness.

I had always entertained thoughts of suicide, but I didn't think I was even capable of that. By the time I was 14, my despair was out of control and I had reached a breaking point. I wanted to die, but I would feel guilty because I would cause my family so much pain if I did. So instead I asked to be hospitalized to prevent my own suicide.

This was the start of an arduous process that was harder than anything I had ever done before. One of the more difficult things about depression is that it is silent and invisible. In order to defeat it, I would have to admit to everyone I loved what a horrible, hopeless, furious person I was.

Every time I sat on the hard little couch during therapy, I was forced to poke and prod at the things that hurt the most. But I knew I had to do it. I knew that the only reason I was alive was that I had some responsibility that I had to fulfill before I died. In some vague way, it was "to help humanity." But I still needed the hope to believe that I could do something.

Two years after I consciously began to wage guerrilla warfare against depression, I was introduced to a philosophy of unrestrained hope and optimism. The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin was an exact confirmation of what I thought the world should be like, but it was

much deeper and more important — it was practical. I wasn't really down with the idea of chanting, but I figured I'd sit through that (like I used to sit through church) and just take the useful philosophy. I'd treat it like a Buddhist buffet.

As soon as I heard about Buddhism, I wholeheartedly applied its principles to my life. How could I just pass by a philosophy with a fundamental belief in the infinity of human potential for happiness and creativity? Still, I only chanted to be polite.

It took me a long time to really embrace chanting. If living by Buddhist ethics was working so well, what was the point of repeating Nam-myoho-renge-kyo over and over? Sure, the meaning was significant. But couldn't I just embrace the philosophy without having to chant the words?

Two years after I decided to practice Buddhism, I went off to college but I ended up hating the school I chose. I lived in a dorm and the commute home was two-and-a-half hours, so I was pretty much on my own. But, boy, was I miserable.

One afternoon I was feeling especially unpleasant and I had exhausted all other options. I was too upset to study, listen to music, talk to anyone, or even read the back of a cereal box. So I shouted "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo!" and it was so cathartic and wonderful that I tried it again. Then I felt silly standing there in my dorm room, alone, shouting, so I sat down and chanted for a whole minute. No miracles happened, but I did feel a bit better. I was starting to generate ideas about how to solve some of my problems.

I started chanting consistently. At first, I would chant on the way to the bus stop to slow the bus down if I were late. Then I tried chanting for things like being calm during an especially grueling exam. I was getting results. In fact, it worked so well that I couldn't think of a good reason not to chant.

As I steadily became a happier person through practicing this Buddhism and taking responsibility for my own life, I resolved to learn gongyo. At that time, which was about a year ago, gongyo was roughly a once-a-week occurrence because it took me so long to get through it that I was never motivated to do it.

My brother, Art, really pulled through for me, though. I had transferred to Temple University, and he would arrange his schedule so that we could do morning gongyo together in an obscure computer lab in the physics building. He always went out of his way to do gongyo with me, and he let me do it as slowly as I needed to. I sincerely appreciate his creative support and encouragement.

Now, I am proud to say that I have a fully self-motivated practice. By living my life by Buddhist principles, I am taking concrete actions every day to become a stronger, happier person, and by so doing I hope to encourage other people to do the same. I can say with complete sincerity that I am a truly happy person. I have won over hopelessness, one of the most potent poisons in life. I overcame depression through my own efforts, and I have limitless confidence in the imminent success of everyone who seeks to create happiness and peace in their lives.