

EXPERIENCE—MAKONNEN ZERFU, LOS ANGELES PREVAILING OVER OUR DESTINY

Nichiren Daishonin writes, “You must quickly reform the tenets that you hold in your heart and embrace the one true vehicle, the single good [doctrine of the Lotus Sutra]” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 25). In other words, the treasure of the heart is the most important one. Thus, in order to win, we must first triumph in our hearts. If we lose in our hearts, then failure is inevitable.

The beliefs we cherish deep in our hearts play a more profound role in our lives than our intellect. It is important to change those beliefs that prompt us to be pessimistic and negative; to annihilate them on the deepest level.

Originally from Ethiopia, I came alone to the United States in December 1987. A year later, I was grieving because I found out that my younger sister died in a car accident on her way home. Her body was taken to my parents on Christmas Day. She was 22 years old.

The following year, my brother who was 16 also died of an unknown illness in just one day. I could not understand why all this happened and started drinking three or four times a week. I was depressed constantly. I did not enjoy going to work; it was an obligation. I did not know the purpose of life, nor did I have any goals. My future seemed totally bleak. At this time I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. It was January 1990.

Since then, in addition to having stopped drinking, I have received so many benefits that it would be impossible to enumerate them. However, I would like to share the deepest impact of this practice that is changing me in a fundamental way. I generally thought of myself as an optimist. Of course I have a good reason: I have set out to achieve the things I want to. I have achieved, if not all, at least several of them.

Recently, however, while I was chanting I discovered something very profound about myself, which I have overlooked for years. I started realizing that I am not truly an optimist. I am only optimistic whenever I perceive that things are relatively possible. In other words, I was selectively optimistic. As I chanted more deeply, I realized that I have been harboring these feelings: “I will lose,” “I will not succeed,” “Somehow things are not going to work out,” “I will not be able to find the things I am looking for.” Without me realizing it, I was agonizing in anxiety. I was unconsciously distressed.

I remembered things that I was saying to myself silently without ever knowing it. Things like: “It’s too difficult,” “It takes too long,” “It’s too late,” “I’m too old,” “It’s too far,” “It requires a lot of money,” “It’s too much work,” “There are people better than me, why do they want me?” “This is all I am capable of doing,” “I’m too tired,” “I’m too sick,” “There isn’t a good partner for me out there,” “I can’t,” “It’s impossible,” etc. These thoughts actually became my credo or statement of faith.

I realized that I had to fight the inherent pessimism of my beliefs. One day after I chanted, I saw a woman on television advising single women who felt that there aren’t men out there for them. She said something very profound: “If you are looking for someone with the expectation that you will not find him, then you won’t.” This is consistent with Buddhism. If we are operating with the expectation that this will not work out, then consistent with our beliefs, we will fail. It is not like something good happens to us regardless of our negative beliefs. There is no miracle or chance in Buddhism. I realized that the right attitude and belief must precede one’s results or benefits—that benefits are projections of positive attitude along with taking action.

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If we want to see happiness in front of the mirror, then we must smile. So I began to reform my beliefs, to fight my disposition to pessimism. Pessimism doesn't always manifest in a big way. It is all the little things we do. For example, a few weeks ago I was looking for a specific book on the Renaissance and I caught myself saying, "I don't think I will find it." It is these kinds of deep-seated premonitions and misgivings that prevent us from ever achieving anything great.

On another occasion, I was reading a book on American history. I came across the Declaration of Independence. On July 4, 1776, in order to free themselves from the tyranny and domination of British rule, the 13 colonies declared their independence, even though independence did not come immediately.

The Declaration of Independence is the tenet of this nation. It is because of this document that America has become one of the strongest and most vital nations in the world. Before a new, free and dynamic nation could be built, the old beliefs of injustice, inequality and tyranny had to be replaced by a new belief in freedom. The Declaration of Independence is that conviction and resolve for freedom and emancipation.

This gave me insight into my own life. In order to advance and grow, I have to overthrow my old beliefs and also articulate my own declaration. So I wrote my own declaration: "I pledge to quickly reform my disposition to pessimism that daunts and distresses me and to allow optimism to be deeply rooted in my heart." I made a determination to never limit myself as to what I can do and never say "I can't."

At the beginning of 1999, I determined to finish my graduate studies in educational administration. Little did I know that five of my classes were scheduled in San Diego; I tried to look for other options but to no avail. The idea of commuting from Los Angeles to San Diego seemed inconceivable; it's a two-hour drive. Everyone I talked with agreed with me that it would be extremely stressful and exhausting since I am also teaching math at a high school. I thought that if I drove to San Diego twice a week after teaching from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., I would pass out or be extremely tired. My pessimism seemed valid.

But as soon as I chanted, I felt that I had to challenge myself. Right there, I pledged to dedicate each mile of my trip to the many times I sabotaged myself, to the many times I made excuses to avoid challenges, to the many times I retreated fearing I would lose. The first day I drove to attend class, I returned around midnight. To my surprise, the next morning I woke up feeling unbelievably strong. From that day on, I look forward to making the drive.

Finally, I have completed all five classes with four A's and one B. I will graduate this month. When I realized that I finished my classes, I felt sad because I still have sweet memories of my struggles. I realized that it is only through hardship that I can build strength and unless I challenge myself, I will never know how strong and indefatigable I am.

When we grow up, what we acquire from our environment, i.e., our parents and society, is part of our external self. Unfortunately, we become so attached to this false self that we believe that we are what we are told or what we think we are; as if all the things we inherit from our environment is our essential nature. However, Buddhism teaches that there is what we call the inner self or true self— a self that is undying, unconditioned and untainted by circumstances. Nichiren Daishonin says: "If when wide awake we examine our true nature, we will find no beginning that requires our being born and no end that

requires our dying. What we will find is the essence of life, which can neither be burned by apocalyptic flames, nor worn away by flood, nor cut down by sword, nor pierced by arrow” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 563).

For the past four years, I have been trying to bring my younger brother, Minassie, to the United States from Ethiopia. All these years I have been agonizing over this issue because deep inside I believed that it was impossible. You see, it is my mind that measures and evaluates how and why this is not possible and very eloquently persuades me into relinquishing hope. That’s why it is futile to rely on intellect because intellect can be easily overruled by the unconscious influences. The famous psychologist Carl Jung stated that, “Consciousness succumbs all too easily to unconscious influences.”

Six months ago, I genuinely chanted to change my attitude. Instead of wasting my time distressing over whether I would succeed or not, I single-mindedly made the causes to reunite with my brother. As a result, in November 1999, my brother was granted a visa.

I inherited a lot of my pessimism from my mother. But I know that I didn’t come into this world just to replicate my parents. If that were true, then life would be meaningless. I realize that I am here to change my karma and to create a new life. All of my profound benefits were possible because of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I am deeply grateful to be able, once and for all eternity, to eradicate my deep-rooted karma.

I would like to conclude with this short poem I wrote titled “The Bell of Greatness”:
When the bell of greatness wakes you / destiny puts its heavy grip / rendering you unable to rise to the call. / Nevertheless, greatness lies in changing one’s destiny / in overcoming the deep currents of your disposition / that spins you in the cycle of stalemate. / Assaulting pessimism each day / quickly reform / the beliefs in your heart, the credo, / the axioms of your faith. / The resounding decree is: hope! hope! always triumphant!