

EXPERIENCE—VINESSA SHAW, LOS ANGELES 'EYES WIDE OPEN'

Correspondent Denise Snaer spoke with Vinessa Shaw, a 23-year-old actress who was born into this practice. Vinessa has made broad strides in her young life, staring down reality unflinchingly, if dramatically. Although well known for her role in the movie Eyes Wide Shut, she recently played the lead in projects such as The Weight of Water with Sean Penn, and the NBC mini-series airing in May 2000, called The '70s.

WT: You have an active practice, and your career is booming right now. To what do you attribute this fortune?

Vinessa: I was born into a Buddhist family. At an early age, I decided to learn gongyo as a personal challenge. But my real practice started when I was 12.

WT: What was the carrot?

Vinessa: I had this miserable thing in my life where I'd get sick just before an important event, for example, my ballet performances. It was very disappointing. One time, I had the opportunity to be in my aunt's wedding. Just before the wedding, I got sick with strep throat. The doctor said it would be impossible for me to recover in time. Impossible is a trigger word for my mom. She overcame a life-threatening condition and went on to a successful career as an actress. She sat me down and we chanted 45 minutes of vigorous daimoku. My fever broke and two days later I walked down the aisle as a bridesmaid. I had actual proof for myself.

WT: When did you choose acting and why?

Vinessa: When I was about 12, my sister and I asked our mother if we could be actresses. At first, she said no. We could act once we could drive ourselves to auditions. She spoke with us about the reality of life as young actresses, possibly having to miss important events like my graduation or a best friend's birthday party. Most of all, we had to get a good education first. Then she became our manager.

WT: You must have had many ups and downs.

Vinessa: As SGI President Ikeda says, a Buddha is a person who refuses to succumb. I kept challenging my illness which still pursued me whenever I had an audition. I saw the illness as my inner devil and decided to do battle. I chanted for hours just to connect with the Mystic Law. The minute doubt comes between me and the Gohonzon, I lose my way.

WT: The punch from our initial excitement for the goal dissipates with doubt.

Vinessa: Exactly. We forget how great we really are. Our work and activities are a tangible way to experience the benefits of the Law. But the minute I chant desperately, my results are hazy and painful.

WT: Growing up in a Buddhist family while attending a public school, could you see the difference between you and your peers?

Vinessa: At 12, you don't want to be different. You want to fit in. To be cool. I told some friends, but when others called and heard my parents in the background belting out gongyo, I'd say, "Oh that's nothing — some kind of new music." But I always found a way to do gongyo. Even at sleepovers. My friends had me chant in the bathroom, so that their parents couldn't hear.

WT: It's phenomenal that you have maintained this strong and consistent practice.

Vinessa: Well, that's just it. It's that "if you are frightened, you will not attain

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enlightenment” thing that Nichiren Daishonin writes about in the Gosho. When I was in college in New York, I hated it and missed my family. I thought I would die of sadness. Not suicide, but strong, palpable anguish. Mom called and told me to use the Gohonzon. She wanted me to draw on my Buddha nature. Dad called surreptitiously and often, caring and hoping his guidance would sink in. One day, I couldn’t take the pain any longer. Even though it was 2:00 a.m., I asked a fellow student, an SGI member from Turkey, to chant with me. We chanted so vigorously that we woke up all the other girls. Not cool, but sometimes you have to scream your pain out.

WT: I’m familiar with the “Rebel Yell” ... so what happened next?

Vinessa: Once I sat in front of the Gohonzon, I couldn’t stop chanting. I chanted for hours. Once I calmed down, the knots in my stomach disappeared and I seemed to hear a voice say I would be in a great place by the end of the year.

WT: And then?

Vinessa: The sadness was gone. I persevered and felt light. At the end of that year, I was back home and transferred to a college that suited me perfectly.

WT: President Ikeda always keeps the youth close to his heart. I respect you for your tenacity to live this practice. It’s one thing to pay lip service to this fortune, but don’t you think we must treat our mentor’s words as verbs?

Vinessa: That’s true. Every word of guidance is a “doing” word, filled with courage.

WT: And the willingness to step into the dark with confidence and come out on top.

Vinessa: I remember my struggle with school and the times when my sister and I did our homework in the car on the way to auditions. Nothing was wasted. I especially loved Sociology, which helps me experience other cultures with compassion. I was a bit confused about this practice for oneself and others. But when I attended my district and youth meetings, my life-condition soared!

WT: What if you’re in a position where you can’t do gongyo?

Vinessa: That happens. I didn’t function well at first. But once I dropped the feelings of guilt and superstition, I am fine because I know in my heart that I am doing my best. Some people believe that if they do not have a certain thing, they will never be happy. I like to look at my life often, to see what pattern I am repeating, and to change it. I also ask myself when I am chanting, is my ego in the way, or am I chanting from a good place? I’m still looking at the difference between chanting for a goal, or simply to manifest my Buddhahood. If I feel I am chanting from a “wanting” or “beggar’s” place, I try to see that immediately. It takes a while, sometimes, but we are who we are. I aim to trust my prayer in any situation.

WT: You just appeared in a controversial movie with Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman and especially, the great director Stanley Kubrick. How did you get that role in *Eyes Wide Shut*?

Vinessa: That’s the other benefit from chanting at school. Once I got back to Los Angeles, things just seemed to happen naturally. I was chanting to use my talent, moving in the best direction for my life. I wanted to touch people’s hearts and create something rewarding. I chanted as much as possible on the set. Although everyone has the same goal, our egos get in the way. It can be a tumultuous time. I chanted every day for everyone to feel joy, protection and success in our particular area. We have to unite our ideas. In other words, world peace. Stanley Kubrick was wonderful. I got to know him well during those two months. We were all sad when he died. I was also surprised by Tom Cruise’s courtesy, appreciation and warmth toward the whole crew.

WT: Did you tell him about your practice?

Vinessa: Yes! He said: “Wow, you’re a Buddhist! That’s great.” He admired the fact that I’m a Buddhist. He’s a Scientologist, but seemed intrigued that someone my age was living a profoundly spiritual life.

WT: To kick off this Year of Youth, what are your plans?

Vinessa: I think it is very important to live your practice. Become as educated and aware as possible. Our practice is essential to ground and stabilize ourselves. We see on television the most horrible images of reality—the bombings at various schools, as well as other atrocities. When I chant, I try to make my Nam-myoho-renge-kyo resound throughout the world. Do you know what I mean?

I would also share with my fellow youth division that we should use the publications as our lifeline. We are in President Ikeda’s heart and the *World Tribune* is him talking to us “up front and very personal.”

It’s great being able to design your future, how you want to live. We forget how important youth are, how fortunate we are to do our human revolution. We see the new century as our building ground, while society cringes from it.

I have something to read for you from the June 24, 1999, *World Tribune*: “If we let our minds master us, our faith will be destroyed. There are far too many who give themselves up to fame and status. We get taken in by desire for money, maintaining a good reputation, and lose sight of our fundamental path. Faith is what enables us to become the master of our minds and open up the future with the determination that everything begins from now. In the moment.”