

EXPERIENCE—BRIAH ANSON, ST. PAUL, MINN. A CRUCIAL MOMENT

Briah Anson faces her greatest fear: dying in a plane crash. She explains: ‘Keenly aware of how I was facing possible death: I began to chant with my entire being... I chanted every Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as if it might be my last.’

“Practicing only the seven characters of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo may appear limited, but since they are the master of all the Buddhas of the three existences, the teacher of all the bodhisattvas in the ten directions, and the guide that enables all living beings to attain the Buddha way, it is profound” (The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 317).

Twenty-seven years ago, all I knew about this practice was the single phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. From Morris, Minn., I moved to Kansas City, Mo., and built a wonderful life, expanding my Buddhist practice. As I review my journey, it’s as if all the wheels of possible directions keep being oiled to take me in the direction of happiness, health and success, not only for myself, but also for others in my sphere of influence.

I would like to share an experience I had after two weeks of vacation in Italy. My partner Lorie and I had been chanting daimoku every day of our vacation and had introduced people to this practice. We were booked on a non-stop 747 flight from Amsterdam to Minneapolis.

I’ve always been comfortable flying. My father was a pilot and ran an airline, an airplane overhaul plant, and was president of an airclaims insurance-adjusting company. For some reason though, even though we were anxious to get back home, I just didn’t want to board that plane. Meanwhile, Lorie went ahead and boarded with the more than 400 other passengers.

Finally, a gate agent told me it was time to board. Our seats were in the middle section of the wing area. After take-off, everything was going smoothly. I was having an interesting conversation with the woman next to me, a U.N. nuclear arms inspector who lived in Vienna. Dinner would be served soon. We were about two hours from Amsterdam, well over the Atlantic Ocean, when there was an explosion. The plane dipped about 10 feet. I turned to Lorie and said, “This is serious, start chanting.” Several seconds later, BOOM! The plane dipped again. No word came from the captain. The “Fasten Seat Belts” sign came on and flight attendants checked that our belts were indeed fastened.

There we were, over the Atlantic Ocean with still another five hours to our destination and I am facing my worst fear: dying in a fiery plane crash. Minutes later, another explosion and big dip. Finally, the captain says they are trying to figure out what is going on with one of the engines. In a state of panic, I notice that the captain is rapidly taking the plane down to a much lower altitude. To make it safer for an ocean crash landing? All the emergency lighting in the plane was out. We were descending so quickly that the pressure in my ears and the cabin seems distinctly different. Within the next minute, two more explosions followed.

Because my dad investigated major airplane crashes, I know the sequence of events of most major crashes. I am also keenly aware of how I was facing possible death: I began to chant with my entire being; every daimoku had the full power of my life in it. This was no

time for panic. I chanted every Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as if it might be my last. Passages from Nichiren Daishonin and SGI President Ikeda filled my mind, encouraging me to go deeper to that place of No Fear:

“Life is the most precious of all treasures” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 955)

“Nichiren Daishonin in the Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life says, ‘For one who summons up his faith and chants Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with the profound insight that now is the last moment of his life’—the Lotus Sutra proclaims: ‘After his death, a thousand Buddhas will extend their hands to free him from all fear and keep him from falling into the evil paths.’ How can we possibly hold back our tears and the inexpressible joy of knowing that not just one or two, nor only one or two hundred, but as many as a thousand Buddhas will come to greet me with open arms” (*Unlocking the Mysteries of Birth and Death*, p. 94).

“The most important thing is our state of life at each moment. Our state of life from moment to moment determines the overall course our life takes.”

These guidances that I had read welled forth like a deep geyser in my life.

Within minutes, the captain announced that we were turning back and would be in Amsterdam in two hours, adding that they would be dumping fuel over the ocean. That would be the last we heard from him for hours.

In a timeless vortex, I saw much of my life before me. I saw clearly what was most essential — my practice of Buddhism — my chanting for myself and others. I saw the faces of people I had introduced to this practice over the past 27 years. Feeling no regrets, only deep appreciation for what I felt was the sum total of my life: my relationship with my family; being with the person I truly loved the most; how I had contributed to my friends’ welfare and that of countless others.

Suddenly, I no longer feared death. I found myself chanting for the absolute protection and enlightenment of every person on board, directing daimoku to each of the engines. To my left, a man looked out his window, a look of sheer terror shown on his face, and he put his head between his knees and cried. What I didn’t know was that he was seeing 15-foot flames coming out of one of the engines!

I imagined President Ikeda driving the plane; then I imagined Nichiren Daishonin there. I told Lorie how happy I was that we were together. That just made her cry. She wanted to see her dog again and didn’t want her family to have to face any more tragedy. I found myself being strict with her, saying: “This is no time for fear. We must chant with complete confidence!” By now, I was realizing that my mission was not complete — much promise lay ahead.

I had moved back to Minnesota only a year before, with a new life partner and a new home. I was starting my business again, after being well established in Kansas City for 20 years. My private practice as a Rolfer [deep-tissue massage therapy] was thriving: I had a three-month waiting list. Days before leaving on vacation, I found a new business partner and new office space. I was making friends and professional contacts and starting to help people practice Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism — I was not going to perish here on this plane! I knew that I had a big future ahead and that if that future was only as long as the next minute or the next second, I would face it in the highest life-condition I could possibly muster.

As Lorie and I continued to chant, the woman from the U.N. continued reading her magazine, comforted by the sound. Many people on the plane seemed oblivious to the seriousness of the situation. The flight attendants were trying hard not to look distressed,

yet you could see the stress on their faces.

After about an hour of chanting and experiencing a state of tremendous confidence and joy, I felt that we were out of imminent danger. Another hour later, the captain said we would be landing shortly and it would be an unusually hard one. I understood why. Having to land with two engines and a full load of passengers and cargo, the captain would have to put the plane down at the beginning of the runway to have enough room to stop. This was another crucial moment.

We did slam down on the runway but the plane came to a safe stop. You never heard so many happy people in your life! I was overcome with an incredible sense of appreciation ...just to be alive! We would be spending the night in Amsterdam and re-boarding the same aircraft the next morning. Here was another challenge!

The next morning, Lorie was nervous about the possibility of having to re-board the plane. I was feeling bonded and connected to the people in our plane and just couldn't imagine them being on that plane either. When we got to the airport, they announced that the plane could not be fixed. Another huge wave of relief came over everyone.

We were re-routed via Oslo. By the time we boarded though, we felt exhausted and re-traumatized. Once again, I was determined to seriously chant daimoku for each person on that flight, to erase any residue of trauma and have that flight be a totally safe, smooth and healing experience back to the U.S. I chanted for at least two hours and indeed it was a very peaceful, quiet and enjoyable flight. It was a sunny, clear, beautiful, blue-sky day.

I remember looking out the window over the East Coast. I could feel the peace of our land. It had a feeling of clarity, of lightness and I felt another surge of deep appreciation for my life. At a crucial moment, the accumulated benefit of my 27 years of practice had come charging out with a confidence that surprised even me. I renewed my determination to live a strong and healthy life so that I can encourage others to change their destiny. True or imagined, I knew after I got off that plane in Amsterdam that I had overcome some very deep fears which had liberated me at the very core of my life. It was such a joyful experience in the end. I realized how joyful it is not only to be alive, but to be able to touch other people's lives.

We've come into this world with our gifts, limitations, despairs, hopes and dreams to learn that we can be truly victorious. This struggle and process is extremely difficult and cannot be done without the support, guidance and leadership of others. I want to thank each of you who, through your actual proof, continue to inspire me to take one more step toward my own happiness and that of other people.

And finally, from President Ikeda: "Faith is concerned with the revitalization of life itself. Whether what is happening is good or bad, only with faith can one find infinite meaning in each event" (Ibid., p. 101).