

## EXPERIENCE—FRANK CASTANHEIRA, SAN FRANCISCO REPAYING MY DEBT OF GRATITUDE

**Frank Castanheira introduces his parents and family to the practice in gratitude.**

Eighteen years ago I started practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism not knowing what an incredible journey I was about to embark upon. Shortly after my Gohonzon was enshrined, I vividly remember chanting the night away when I began to cry without any end in sight. Strangely enough I was crying tears of both joy and sorrow. On the one hand, I knew at that moment that I had encountered a great philosophy that would carry me through life. I also cried tears of sadness because, for the first time in my life, I could clearly see how unhappy I really was. I was living in what Buddhism calls the worlds of Hell, Hunger and Animality.

Growing up my family was very close-knit, but I grew very distant and isolated due to my father's overwhelming disciplinarian strictness, which cast a shadow of doubt and fear over my life from an early age. Having had such a bad relationship with my father for most of my life, I lacked confidence and became very rebellious.

In school I had difficulty concentrating and sitting still; I was constantly being reprimanded. Then at 14, I started experimenting with drugs. My relationship with my father worsened quickly. His way of dealing with me was by sending me away. During my high school years, I attended two military academies and two boarding schools. Each time my father shipped me somewhere, my self-esteem suffered and my tendency toward drugs increased.

Early on I realized that I needed to practice Buddhism so I could change my karma and become truly happy. Secondly, I felt a tremendous debt of gratitude toward my parents. I felt the greatest treasure I could give them was to introduce them to this practice. Since I was the rebellious child of the family, my mother was a staunch Catholic and my father a complete atheist, it seemed impossible. However, I made the determination in the depths of my life that I would share my Buddhist practice with my parents and sisters.

SGI President Ikeda's guidance of Feb. 22, 1990, states: "Buddhism elucidates three types of filial piety or natural obligations to parents. Giving one's parents material goods such as clothing and food is the lowest type of filial piety. Respecting the desires of one's parents is the middle type and leading one's parents to Buddhahood with the Mystic Law is the highest type" (March 1990 *Seikyo Times*, p. 54).

I was born in Bogota, Colombia, raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and attended a Catholic school. Despite the deep Catholic influence in my life, I began my Buddhist practice full-steam ahead while living in San Francisco. I was able to create the wisdom and fortune of deciding to start with my little sister, Juana, who was coming to San Francisco to live with me.

I knew that if Juana could practice, we could join forces. In July 1982, Juana started to practice Buddhism. With unity, we began chanting for our family's happiness.

For two years, Juana and I encouraged my mother to start practicing. She was very adamant in stating that she was not interested. Despite that, she would still attend every activity within our district. Soon Mother developed friendships with the members in our district who embraced her and encouraged her. At that time, both Juana and I were very

active in the organization. My mother's understanding of the kosen-rufu movement grew. As she watched us challenge ourselves through our Buddhist practice, she witnessed her children change from self-centered and spoiled to responsible, caring and active youth. During one of Mother's visits to San Francisco from Brazil, she decided to begin her practice and received the Gohonzon in 1984.

One year later, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. We were determined to beat it. I was with her during all her chemotherapy treatments and supported her practice. Today one of the greatest treasures in my heart is the memory of struggling and chanting for three months with my mother. She was able to overcome the cancer and return to Brazil.

In 1987, she had a relapse. This time the cancer returned with a vengeance; it spread to her lymph nodes and bones. She died on Oct. 11, 1987, after struggling with all her might. With Juana beside her, she died peacefully in her sleep with a radiant smile on her face. I had firm conviction that she had attained enlightenment.

With the passing of my mother, Juana and I started to focus our prayers for our father and older sister. Through many years of chanting, both our atheist father and meditating sister started to see us differently. We always referred to positive changes in our lives as a benefit of this practice.

In 1997, my father came to visit us. Instead of staying for a week he decided to stay for three months. This visit was a turning point in my relationship with him. My father seemed to grasp something very deep in my life. Instead of criticizing me, he became my best ally. My father was convinced that my erratic behavior and drug abuse had a medical reason. Despite my apprehension, I agreed to see a medical doctor. It was then that I was diagnosed as a manic depressive and suffered from attention deficit disorder.

Through the changes he saw in my life—from overcoming my addictions to becoming a responsible adult—my father began to respect my Buddhist practice. Last year he started making offerings of fruit to the Gohonzon.

Unexpectedly in July 1999, my father was diagnosed with brain cancer—seven tumors to be exact. Given my father's age of 77, the doctors were not encouraging him to do any chemotherapy or radiation therapy. The doctors gave him three months to live. For the first two months of his last three months, we chanted with my father every day for approximately 30 minutes. My father truly enjoyed chanting.

My father never received the Gohonzon but at least he started to practice for himself and others, despite his limited understanding of Buddhism. On a couple of occasions while chanting, he told us to call Ana, our older sister, to come and chant with us. The four of us actually chanted together on various occasions. What a golden memory!

My father was never able to express his love for us in an emotional way. From the time we were toddlers, he had always been distant. Now, because of his illness, all his inhibitions had disappeared. For the first time he was open to receive our love and care. On the other hand, each one of us had finally come to understand that under the cold façade he had always put on, he indeed loved us. This was a tremendous benefit because it allowed us to connect with him through our hearts and bridge that gap that had always existed. With this new awareness, we were able to express our love and gratitude each day as we cared for him.

During my dad's last month, his brain was shutting down all his bodily functions. He became bedridden and could barely speak. Juana and I began taking turns doing gongyo and chanting at his bedside while holding his hand. My father would squeeze our hands

and nod approvingly. Dad passed away peacefully on Oct. 8, 1999, with a beautiful smile much like my mother's. The three of us were present when he took his last breath.

“Whether people to whom you explain Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism decide to take faith depends mainly upon their life tendency and their capacity to understand and believe in Buddhism. In any case, whether a person determines to take faith in Buddhism after listening to an explanation or listens to the teaching and does not decide to take faith in it, the benefit that the believer receives is the same,” President Ikeda said (March 1990 *Seikyo Times*, p. 70).

Nichiren Daishonin’s writing “The Four Debts of Gratitude” states: “One who studies the teachings of Buddhism must not fail to repay the four debts of gratitude.... The first of the four debts is that owed to all living beings.... The second of the four debts is that owed to one’s father and mother.... The third is the debt owed to one’s sovereign.... The fourth is the debt owed to the three treasures” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 43–44).

By introducing my parents to Buddhism, they were able to face illness and death victoriously.

I have tremendous appreciation and joy in my heart for having been able to repay my debt of gratitude to my parents. To all the leaders and members who encouraged me along the way, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Now it is time to repay my gratitude to the Gohonzon, President Ikeda and the SGI.

In “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra,” President Ikeda states: “Those who spread the teaching ‘will have repaid the debt of gratitude that [they] owe to the Buddhas’ (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 278). The sole prayer of the Buddha and the mentor is for kosen-rufu. That is why exerting oneself in spreading the teaching is what it means to truly repay one’s debt of gratitude to one’s mentor” (January *Living Buddhism*, p. 38). Because in the end, “faith is all that matters.”