

**CHALLENGING ILLNESS
EXPERIENCE—KEITH WASHINGTON, BRONX, N.Y.
A MEDICAL MYSTERY**

Keith Washington says: ‘As of March 5, the HIV is still undetectable; my T-cell count is back up to 200.’

I have had many great experiences since I began chanting. I'd like to share one of my most profound experiences with you.

Feb. 20, 1986, has become a day that will never be forgotten. It opened up the door to my mission in life today. On the evening of Feb. 20, I was on my way home from work when I stopped to pick up some sake to celebrate my third year of Buddhist practice with my aunt, who was preparing dinner.

As I left the store, I was mugged by two thugs. They stabbed me twice in the thigh and demanded money. In the struggle, I gave up the last five dollars I had. One of them said: “No wallet! Kill him anyway!” As the other began to stab me a third time in the neck, with what I realized was a needle, I began to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo out loud. The needle missed my neck and they took off running! Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo saved my life!

I was taken to the hospital where doctors encouraged me to take care of my health and get regular checkups. Since I was stabbed with a needle, the potential for HIV infection was possible. I never feared this possibility. SGI President Ikeda says in his poem, “To My Young American Friends,” “Faith is to fear nothing.” My thought was to bring hope to millions of people if I was infected through showing actual proof of overcoming such an illness based on my Buddhist practice.

In *The Human Revolution*, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda once said, “What medicine can't cure, the Gohonzon will.” Having read *My Recollections*, I knew that President Ikeda also suffered illness during his youth. The fact that both Josei Toda and President Ikeda overcame tuberculosis based on faith and taking care of themselves encouraged me to fight and win.

Thirteen years later in February 1999, HIV showed up in my blood. When the doctors told me this, I wondered if I could handle the disease. Could I take medication and deal with the side effects, and what would the result be from taking the medication? The main question was how long would I live?

I began to reread *My Recollections*. President Ikeda says: “When I became a father, I prayed that the child would grow up healthy. This suggests, naturally, that I was more concerned about physical well-being than anything else; apparently my prayers have been answered.” This encouraged me to pray for my physical health and well-being as well. When he wrote the following in his diary entry “April 5, state of health terribly poor; severe pains continue.... But my situation just wouldn't allow me to give in to my condition,” this gave me the courage to never give up. I determined to live long. I determined to transform poison into medicine and show great actual proof for kosen-rufu.

By May, I was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS. I said to myself, “Because I have the Gohonzon, I will chant a lot, share Buddhism with others and overcome this illness.” I was living in Dallas with my partner, Reggie, when this all came about, and so we started a campaign. We chanted no less than one hour a day, attended every meeting and studied

The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin every evening after gongyo. I spent five days in the hospital in May. What was at first thought to be pneumonia turned out to be bronchitis; my weight dropped from 160 lbs. to 119 lbs.

In June, Reggie and I communicated with family and friends and I contacted SGI friends in New York and Hawaii. One of the members in Dallas contacted the Kansai members in Japan. Everyone was chanting for me!

Reggie and I prepared to return to New York to be close to family.

My doctor started me on three medications. I also continued to eat healthily and drink various herb teas. This kept me from having any side effects. I told my doctor that my goal was to gain my weight back to 140 lbs. and for my viral load (which shows how much HIV virus is in the body) to become undetectable within two months. According to the doctors, it would take six to eight months if I lived that long.

The Dallas members' support was incredible! Our home was like a mini SGI culture center, as we performed evening gongyo and daimoku regularly with members. Together we studied "On Curing Karmic Disease," along with President Ikeda's guidance from the *World Tribune*.

Every morning and evening, I read the following passage: "Your boils have resulted from only one offense—slandering the correct teaching. The Mystic Law you now embrace surpasses the moon-loving meditation. How could your boils possibly not be healed and your life span not extended? If these words of mine prove untrue, you should shout: "The Buddha, the eye of the entire world, is a great liar, and the Lotus, the wonderful sutra of the single vehicle, is a scripture of clever flourishes. The World-Honored One should give me proof if he cares about his good name! All the saints and worthies should come to protect me, if they do not want to be false to their vows!" (*The Writings of Nichiren Dai-shonin*, p. 634).

By the end of June, my strength was back. I completed a two-and-a-half-day drive from Texas to New York.

On July 6, 1999, I took another blood test. I'm happy to report that in three weeks, my viral load went from the highest 750,000 to undetectable! I weighed in at 140 lbs. and as of March 5, my status is still undetectable and I weigh 163 lbs. My T-cell count is back up to 200. I was told by doctors from three hospitals that this is medically impossible. I'm called a mystery to the medical profession.

I have introduced this Buddhism to doctors, nurses, patients, priests, nuns, family and friends. In one case, a hospital nun chanted Nam-myoho-enge-kyo with me. The name given to me by her is Sunshine; she said I always look so bright.

I now write for the Saint Vincent Hospital newsletter, called "The Lamp," dedicated to supporting HIV patients. I have shared my experience and written other encouraging articles.

I have written to President Ikeda regularly for the past 11 years. His most recent response in December 1999 was "Please accept my warm regards. I received your message in regard to your health. I am chanting daimoku for you. I'm sending daimoku to you."

Throughout my 16 years of Buddhist practice, all my prayers have been answered. I'm so thankful for this wonderful organization, the support of my partner, friends and family and President Ikeda. I determine to continue doing my best for kosen-rufu.