

CHALLENGING FINANCES EXPERIENCE—BOB REEL, SACRAMENTO, CALIF. GETTING THE JOB DONE

Bob Reel grounds himself in Buddhist practice and develops his financial fortune.

You can mash 'em, fry 'em, boil 'em or bake 'em; add only salt and pepper, or butter and sour cream; or maybe only cheese. I'm talking about a few of the ways you can eat potatoes. I can vividly recall what it was like on a very limited income to eat only potatoes.

I didn't begin auspiciously. As a 17-year-old high school senior in El Paso, Texas, I led a dangerous life of excessive partying that piled poor family interactions on ordinary teenage troubles. I was rebellious and had no direction. But I was searching for something deep. One night I went with a group of friends to a Buddhist meeting (thanks, Linda). I sensed "this is right," that chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo was what I needed and wanted.

Right after graduation, three of us left for a long backpacking adventure in Canada, working our way through national parks back to El Paso. My practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, hit and miss at the start, improved as we traveled. However, you can imagine the mixed reception I received at my parents' home! Having had very limited communication with them for nearly five months, I was showing up on their doorstep. It didn't take long to see that the best thing for me to do was move out. Almost everything I owned was in my backpack, including the Gohonzon.

I changed jobs continuously, lacking any real sense of hope around employment issues. I really struggled just to eat. I can't recall the number of times my utilities were turned off, the number of miles I must have hitchhiked or all the places I lived. Fortunately, several SGI families looked out for me.

In the midst of this poverty and youthful struggle, I found a sense of mission and hope by participating in every type of activity. Introductory meetings, chanting sessions, study meetings, conventions mixed with ongoing behind the scene efforts—I was there! From this, I started to understand what it meant to contribute to kosen-rufu by developing myself and helping others. I've sustained this rhythm to varying degrees throughout my 26 years of practicing Buddhism, my greatest joy.

Fueled and guided by a growing personal mentor-disciple relationship with SGI President Ikeda, I studied his guidance on a daily basis, progressively understanding that the practice of Buddhism and our daily life are not separate. Slowly but surely, I faced my low self-esteem, limited respect for authority and more, in order to contribute toward world peace through this Buddhism. Because of President Ikeda's influence and that of many leaders and members, I began to evolve into a person who could get things done.

My developing fortune manifested externally when I landed a job as an equipment orderly in a hospital, cleaning respiratory therapy equipment and supplies. I actually kept a job! I wanted to win in my daily life. Within a year I was offered the opportunity for more on-the-job training in minor clinical support procedures. I became interested in respiratory therapy (helping to diagnose and treat cardiac and pulmonary disease). The hospital allowed me a flexible schedule while I attended community college and even paid for one hundred percent of my tuition! I graduated with an associate degree and successfully completed my registry examinations.

After a couple of years as a respiratory therapist who never let up on participating in

SGI activities, I became an assistant manager for the respiratory care department of a small local hospital. Within a few months, I was promoted and relocated in Texas to direct a slightly larger cardiopulmonary department in the small town of Nacogdoches. I traveled monthly to Houston to attend the World Peace Prayer meeting, continued my personal practice and study, attended a large activity in Dallas with President Ikeda, and every once in awhile actually explained my Buddhist practice to another human being. Struggling to maintain an active practice for myself and others was not easy on my own—my personal strength, happiness and sense of mission were really tested. Man, I missed the West Coast and a more active practice! I could feel the difference in my life.

Over the next 10 years, I continued to develop by challenging myself to achieve many work and SGI organizational objectives while treating people in the most encouraging manner. Facing increasing challenges as a manager in health care with only an associate's degree, my practice always enabled me to somehow renew myself and address the immediate issues at hand.

Again I relocated to direct a larger cardiopulmonary department in Farmington, N.M., helping SGI members there progressively create a lively district while participating in all major events in Albuquerque, three hours away. It felt so great being back with other members regularly and contributing again to the development of world peace. Shortly after a conversation with my young men's leader (thanks, Dennis!) about moving to Albuquerque to participate in SGI on a larger scale, a job with a multi-hospital system in Albuquerque became available.

Although this potential new position was about five times larger than my current one, I decided to go for it and was selected. The new job, another relocation, and increased SGI responsibilities again forced me to address my fear of not being good enough, that I wasn't worth it. I worked to apply President Ikeda's guidance to support me through my personal and professional problems, expanding my hope, wisdom and courage to succeed no matter my fears. Quite unexpectedly, the hospital system asked me to assume a larger administrative role—responsibility for all surgical services.

Then I faced true difficulty. The entire health care industry, including my new hospital system, transited through a stressful period of downsizing and restructuring. Without my practice I'm sure I would have been overwhelmed by these circumstances and self-destructed as I had done many times early in my practice. Instead, my responsibilities at work doubled with the addition of all heart-related services.

In studying President Ikeda's guidance to the Culture Department members, I grew into understanding that education imparts a sense of constant learning and growth. It's another way to evolve beyond one's current level of contribution. Wanting to reply to him (in addition to recognizing my own limitations and vulnerabilities without further, more formal education), I finally made the determination to go back to school and both worked and attended classes full time. Time itself was a rare commodity but school was great! I had prepared myself to just struggle through, so it was encouraging that I loved it. In 1998, I earned my bachelor's degree in Public Administration. I felt so strong and joyful from my accomplishment. My life's rhythm was identical to my years of vigorous Buddhist campaigns and consequently I took only one semester off before beginning a master's program in business. And the hospital system paid for my entire tuition for both degrees! For someone who had no financial fortune at all when I began practicing Buddhism, having the cost of three degrees paid for by my employers just amazed me.

Last summer, I was recruited by one of the largest not-for-profit healthcare systems in

the country. The recruiter enticed me to consider applying for a key administrative role in their Sacramento region. California had never occurred to me! But after reading her material and personally investigating further, I applied for the position and went off to a men's meeting at the Florida Nature and Culture Center (thanks, Tony). There I renewed my determination that once I completed my degree in December 1999, I would leap forward with my life and my participation in SGI activities. I chanted with this determination regardless of whether I would be living in Northern California or in Albuquerque.

Now in California, I'm in awe of the trajectory of my life. I work as a vice president in the system's greater Sacramento operations, responsible for all specialty services (women's, children's, orthopedics, heart, oncology, trauma and neuroscience)—the expanding results of continuing to practice this Buddhism and open my life. It's a new world for me in the sense that I now must dig deeper into my life to find the strength necessary to contribute to my new employer and to the Sacramento SGI community in a value-creating fashion.

I thank President Ikeda for his insights into how to practice this Buddhism and live as a human being. I thank the many people in the SGI who have enabled me to continue practicing and to progress in my development as a person. I thank my family for their support. I've kept my promise by jumping into activities in Sacramento. Recently my chapter leader (thanks, Caesar) encouraged me by reminding me that "the voice does the Buddha's work." His profound words stimulated me to go out of my way to give frequent and greater expression of my experiences practicing this Buddhism. I must reply to President Ikeda and the SGI by becoming a person who can inherit this mission for kosen-rufu.

By the way, I still like potatoes!

—with help from Donna Parten