

EXPERIENCE—RAYMOND E. FOTI, TARZANA, CALIF. 'I TREASURE EVERY MOMENT'

After nearly flatlining four times on the operating table, Raymond Foti realizes that 'life is worth more than all the treasures in the universe.'

June 20, 1997, was a rather typical day. After performing a vigorous gongyo and an hour or so of chanting, I went to Torrance to meet an old friend for lunch. We enjoyed a wonderful meal and conversation, then I headed for home. As I said, the normalcy of the day was standard, but the consequences were totally different because I did not end my day with evening gongyo—I was involved in a near fatal car accident. I do not remember what happened after that, though my wife, Minako, has told me the details surrounding the accident.

As the story goes, I was pulling out of a supermarket at about 5 mph, and was broadsided by another car traveling 65 mph. My body was crushed and I suffered numerous injuries. My left leg was broken in three places; I broke eight ribs that punctured my left lung, causing my chest cavity to fill with blood; my spine was twisted; one shoulder was crushed and the other clavicle was separated; and my diaphragm was so jumbled around that my heart and dia-phragm had exchanged places. It was an impossible situation.

I was rushed to the hospital to undergo several risky emergency operations, during which the doctors pronounced me near death four times because my left lung collapsed but my heart would not stop. I was put on a life-support system with a tracheal tube inserted in my throat to open my breathing. They sawed open my chest to repair my diaphragm that was torn in two places and my heart was repositioned back into its sac.

Throughout the ordeal, my wife chanted Nam-myoho-rence-kyo in my ear through a rolled up piece of paper, pleading: "Raymond you can handle this! You can take this karmic retribution!" As she did this, my heart, which was barely beating, began pounding, increasing to 120–40 beats per minute, and my body began shaking even though I was heavily sedated.

The doctors kept telling my wife: "He's not going to make it. There's no way. He'll be dead within the hour." When I survived, they said it was a miracle; they thought it astounding that a man of age 62 would recover from such a horrible accident with such a tremendously long report of near fatal operations. People half my age rarely survive. I believe it was a miracle—a Buddhist miracle. I was protected. I woke up from the coma two weeks later, barely recognizing my wife. In total, I was in the ICU for three weeks, and had been in three different hospitals. The first one was for the operation, the second for recuperation and the third for rehabilitation.

While in the coma, I remember having what some would consider a near-death experience, which significantly altered my life. The best way I could describe it would be as if I entered these tunnels into a cold, hellish state, as described by Nichiren Daishonin as the "Avichi hell" (the hell of incessant suffering), with the imagery of huge, black dogs biting at me and people cloaked in black robes. I tried to yell, but I could only yell in my head. All that I could hear was my name and Nam-myoho-rence-kyo through this madness; it was all that I could hold onto. This happened four times.

Another time I saw a tunnel and I was with all these other people wearing gray robes, but I was the only person in “technicolor.” While in the tunnel, I felt very good, but again there was no light at the end of it. I was ready to go down it. As I continued to walk, I remembered my wife, the SGI organization, a lot of friends, and I consciously decided to go back. That’s when I woke up from the coma.

What I believe, as a result of this experience, is that my faith was being tested. I wasn’t going to die because my mission wasn’t over yet. I believe even in death we have a choice—everyone does.

The accident brought about a new phase—an awakening—that every day is a golden day to create memories. Otherwise you do not know—whether it’s an earthquake, an auto crash, a stray bullet or the sky falling—what’s going to change your entire perspective and put you into a different dimension that we as Buddhists call *ku*, or a state of latency commonly known as death. We never know when we are going to face death.

Of course, I had already practiced Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism for 29 years at the time, and had contemplated the purpose of life and death many times. However, when you nearly flatline four times, you begin to see the wondrous aspect of life. Even though I know life is eternal, “life is the most precious of all treasures” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 955). It is so valuable that you have more respect for yourselves and others, if in fact you are studying *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and applying them to your life. Then no matter what happens, if you chant until the last moment—and I did—you will experience enlightenment and understand the profundity of life.

I treasure every moment, then, and even more so now because I have an extension on my life, something very few people get. A lot of my friends have passed away by various means over the 33 years of my Buddhist practice. This extension has made me kinder, more considerate of how I live.

As I mentioned, the doctors were astounded by my recovery, so it was an ample opportunity to introduce people to this Buddhism. As beat-up looking as I was in the hospital, I told every doctor, nurse, orderly or whoever swept the floor about the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I continued to share this practice with people and it felt a thousand times more valuable to me because it wasn’t so easy to do with a tracheal tube in my neck and half of a lung missing.

Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo has given me this great confidence and power during the most adverse circumstances of my entire life. I had a sense of purpose, a sense of mission—to live and be part of the SGI’s kosen-rufu movement. Sharing Buddhism with others gives me the greatest sense of satisfaction in my life.

After two months of being in the hospital, I was sent home well enough to have visitors and to continue my rehabilitation.

Today, I am totally physically rehabilitated—and my lung, by the way, is growing back, which is documented by my doctors and X-rays. Spiritually and psychically, my senses were amplified from going to *ku*. It opened my eye of wisdom.

I am a clinical hypnotherapist and the work I do for people seems to be far more effective. As the Daishonin says, it is “the voice that does the work of the Buddha.” It is also the voice that does the work of the hypnotherapist. Before the accident, I treated people because they were my clients or patients, but now my true need and feeling to help people have changed. Now it is my heartfelt desire to help everybody that comes to me, whether it is for a splinter or cancer. Also, though it’s not the driving force, I have an understanding that life is eternal, and that the causes I am making now will reflect in my

future lives, as well as this life. At the core of my life, I developed my humanity. I have strong confidence in this and my ability to help others with hypnosis. Just as SGI President Ikeda encourages us to treat our job as we would the Gohonzon, I believe whatever profession we're in we must give it our 100 percent.

A senior in faith, who visited me in the hospital, described the accident in terms of “deliberately choosing one's karma” as a means to prove the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Based on this Buddhist concept, I believe I created this accident as my commitment to prove the power of faith in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Fortunately, I survived to tell the story. Now I believe it's my responsibility to share the power of this practice with as many people as possible.

I can honestly say that I believe when Nichiren Daishonin said kosen-rufu will unfold in the future “as sure as an arrow aimed at the earth cannot miss the target” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 385). Before the accident, the idea of kosen-rufu or world peace was nothing more than a dream or a hope, now I can see it as a reality. This passage has always encouraged me to continue my Buddhist practice.

Since my life has been extended, it's my vehement determination to make every day count. If anyone comes to me for help, whether in society, the SGI organization or professionally, I'll give each person my very best because I care. I will support others. I don't think people have to go through necessarily what I did to learn this, you can learn it by paying attention to seniors in faith, particularly President Ikeda, and of course, Nichiren Daishonin.

I'm looking forward to having a stronger, healthier, happier life—with singing and dancing and romancing—until the age of 120. I believe that those who maintain this dynamic practice until the last moment of their lives can attain their life expectancy and all of their desired goals.