

EXPERIENCE—STACEY MITCHELL, LONG BEACH, CALIF. RECOGNIZING LIFE’S WIDE, OPEN EXPANSE

Stacey Mitchell, 22, develops a hopeful dream for the future by rekindling her Buddhist practice.

Although I was born into a family that practices Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, I haven’t always remained consistent in my Buddhist practice. Actually, I only practiced when I wanted something such as clothes, beer money or to improve my relationships with boys. Though I didn’t really take the practice seriously, I always knew that it worked.

Throughout high school and college, I rebelled against having anything to do with the practice going so far as keeping the Gohonzon wrapped in a box hidden in a drawer for three years. I neglected to tell any of my friends of my Buddhist upbringing because I always had this fear of being different from others. Because I was accepted by the “in crowd” through my grammar and high school years, I never wanted to stray from anything that was accepted as being “cool.” Because I neglected to put to use the power I had inside me, I suffered tremendously. I was more than often nasty to my family, choosing to go out and drink beer with my friends on both weekends and weekdays.

In college, although I missed my family much and was so worried about my father’s health (he struggled to overcome cancer), I steered clear from home most of the time feeling that I didn’t want to know what was going on. I usually chose to hang out with my boyfriend, who also had no hope for the future. I enjoyed dwelling in my own suffering for some reason. I had no goals or aspirations, no mentor, no hope. I had nothing but sleep and parties.

I don’t know how I ever pulled off getting the grades I got because I would buy close to \$300 in books each quarter and would not even open one. Because I was so accustomed to being unhappy and unmotivated, I didn’t realize that I had the power within me to ever overcome this. I was habitually depressed.

Breaking up with my boyfriend did not seem beneficial at the time, but the break-up pushed me to really get to know my family again. I began to go home every other weekend, which seemed extremely excessive to my friends and roommates, just to get away from my depression while at school. I didn’t know what else to do but to run away. My relationship with my mother and father deepened because I spent more time with them, and I finally made an effort to get to know my sister, Kimberly.

Watching them, I began understanding why they practiced Buddhism. For a long time I had wondered why and how they remained happy when we were always extremely broke—money was *always* an issue. My father’s confidence was higher than it had ever been because of his curing cancer and being able to buy a house for the first time instead of constantly renting and moving. My mother, although always hit with a load of stress, was able to hold everything together in crazy times. My sister remained her happy self like she always seemed to be.

I became jealous of their happiness and wanted to begin practicing, but my stubbornness and arrogance kept me from getting in front of the Gohonzon. This was also depressing because they would often chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo together and do morning and evening prayers, while I listened from the living room immersed in some pointless TV

show. I knew something had to change.

One weekend in the summer of 1999, I had plans to visit a friend in Los Angeles, and Kim asked if I could drop her off at practice for the Grand Youth Culture Festival in Santa Monica. I rolled my eyes and reluctantly agreed to take her. On the way, she raved about how great the festival was going to be and how many friends she had reconnected with and also how many new ones she had made. I became interested in what went on at the practices and started feeling the need to see those kids that I had grown up with at Buddhist meetings.

The moment I stepped onto the property of Crossroads School, where the practices were held, everything inside me changed. The power of Buddhism was so incredibly apparent in the faces of all of the youth. You could see SGI President Ikeda's vision for peace being formed right before your eyes.

Because I didn't really know anyone, I tagged along with my sister, finding that I didn't want to leave to go see my friend. I wanted to spend all of my time with Kim. I knew that participating in these practices was the medicine I needed to escape the depressing void I was living in. For the first time in my life, I felt what it was like to really be happy — what an amazing feeling.

Kim left a short time afterward for Italy. Her leaving was surprisingly difficult for me. In the short time that we hung out together, I started feeling what it was like to really have a sister — I fell in love with her.

Her leaving did not stop me from going to practices though. I started going on my own, which was amazing to myself and parents because I had never gone to any activity on my own, and I definitely was never excited about them. I requested every weekend off from work and gave up partying with my roommates on the weekends. My roommates began getting angry with me because they were so accustomed to me begging them to party but they started recognizing the positive change in me.

The biggest changes I experienced from renewing my practice are threefold: One, I finally enshrined the Gohonzon, which was an amazing feeling. Second, I made a deep connection with many SGI-USA members in Santa Barbara, where I went to college. Third, I now have an amazing relationship with my mother, father and sister.

I can now say that I am happy. Of course, I still struggle and am currently a little lost; I'm still searching for my dreams. But instead of letting those struggles keep me down, I use them as a means of going after what I want in life. My Buddhist practice is consistent, and because of this I finally value my life by setting goals and sticking to them. I am excited about the future and the possibility of landing my dream job in film production. I am such a different person — my family can vouch for that. I thank my Buddhist practice and the SGI-USA organization for this.

The following passage from President Ikeda encourages me to continue to challenge myself: "When you encounter a wall, you should tell yourself, 'Since there is a wall here, a wide, open expanse must lie on the other side.' Rather than becoming discouraged, know that encountering a wall is proof of the progress that you have made so far. I hope that you will continually advance in your Buddhist practice with this conviction blazing ever more strongly in your heart" (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 308).