

ACHIEVING SUCCESS ON THE STAGE OF LIFE AN OPERA SINGER'S VICTORY OVER INNER TURMOIL LEADS TO HAPPINESS

BY NATALIE LEVIN, ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

Where do I begin? My life has changed dramatically since I received the Gohonzon on November 14, 1999, a little less than a year-and-a-half ago. I have experienced tremendous benefits as a result of my practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

My dear friend, Cindy Cordes-Ross, introduced me to Buddhism, but I was very hostile at first and uncomfortable with her faith in it. I told her on several occasions that I thought it was weird and I hated that she practiced it. I couldn't understand why she would do something I saw as flaky and ethereal. I never entertained the possibility that anything existed outside of the physical world that I couldn't see with my own eyes.

My view of life and the universe began to unravel when I began to experience debilitating panic attacks in July 1998. Overcome with the feeling that I was losing my mind, I sought therapy at Northwestern University, where I was a graduate student.

As a result of therapy, I came to understand that I had been involved in a sexually abusive relationship with my mentally ill cousin for the past nine years. I was living in a state of denial regarding the nature of this relationship. I was devastated, scared to death and didn't know who I was anymore. I didn't want to speak with anyone in my family because it felt too unsafe. My life was a mixture of pain and anxiety and I began to feel suicidal. I didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel and I felt I literally could not bear to live with the pain another day.

I am an opera singer, and in the midst of all this pain, I managed to fly to New York for an audition. I stayed with my friend Cindy for the weekend. One morning, Cindy and her husband, Michael, were preparing to do their morning prayers. I usually left the room to avoid the discomfort I felt with her Buddhist practice — but this time, I felt compelled to stay. Without their even asking me, I said scornfully, "Alright. I'll try chanting with you."

I held the sutra book in my hand and followed along pretty well. I then chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with them. I felt so foolish and uncomfortable that I started laughing to break the tension I was feeling. Michael had a wonderful response to my laughter.

"That's great, Nat! You're already experiencing the joy of Buddhahood!"

Cindy and Michael were not angry with me for laughing during their ceremony. I was dumbfounded. What happened to all the strict rules I had associated with religion? I was intrigued. Cindy gave me *The Buddha in Daily Life* to read, and a friend of hers I had met only briefly sent me a sutra book, beads and a copy of *The Winning Life*. I was deeply touched that a person who I hardly knew cared enough to give me these gifts. I wasn't used to such sincerity and I decided to start practicing.

I returned to Chicago to finish my master's degree. I chanted a little each day and tried to learn to recite the sutra. I became concerned, however, that every time I started chanting, I burst into tears. It was difficult to chant and suicidal feelings persisted. I managed to graduate and drive to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to do an apprenticeship with the Santa Fe Opera.

In spite of my pain, I continued to chant because I truly didn't know what else to do. I felt like I was on to something, and Cindy told me that my feelings made sense to her, she understood that I was feeling really horrible every time I chanted. She said that Buddhism functions like a mirror to show us the reality of our lives and what we need to change through our practice. My faith in Cindy's words was what convinced me to keep chanting.

The SGI-USA members of Santa Fe took great care of me. Their sincerity and kindness

struck me. At this point, I was still having severe panic attacks and feeling suicidal. Despite this, I performed well and was recognized for my singing and pleasant attitude.

About halfway through the summer, my sickness came to a head. There was a three-day period during which I couldn't stop myself from crazy, tormented laughter and I couldn't sleep. I had one panic attack after another and I was haunted by suicidal thoughts and of the sick man who sexually abused me. No place existed in which I felt safe. I had hit rock bottom.

I began intense therapy. I know it was because of my Buddhist prayers that I was able to find excellent doctors. I saw a local psychopharmacologist who diagnosed me with bipolar II disorder, which is a milder form of manic-depression. I began therapy with a psychiatrist who prescribed medication for me. Ordinarily, one has to do several interviews with a therapist to find the "right match," but I know it was my chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that brought me to my compassionate doctor in Santa Fe.

I spent the rest of the summer adjusting to the medications. I continued working and performed well. I was even awarded a grant in recognition of my career potential. When I completed the Santa Fe Opera season, I moved back to Rockville, Maryland where I lived with my parents. I was still depressed and could barely get out of bed. I found another wonderful therapist in Washington, D.C., who truly cared about me.

My life revolved around attending Buddhist meetings, therapy, exercise, singing and sleep. The members continued to care for me. I hadn't received a Gohonzon yet, but one of my leaders encouraged me to receive it and another gave me an altar. I couldn't believe her generosity!

I could see benefits happening in my life. My parents and I were beginning to communicate sincerely with each other and I began to have a relationship with my sister that made me feel joyful when I saw her. I was able to be more honest with my friends and they responded in kind. This practice brought a sincerity into my life that I had never known before. My parents embraced my practice, and I enshrined my Gohonzon in their home. I had a party the day my Gohonzon was enshrined, and I really enjoyed myself for the first time in months!

In the fall of 1999, I went on two auditions in New York. I prayed earnestly for the energy to rise above depression and make it all the way to Manhattan. In the opera world, singers go to twenty or thirty auditions and can hope, at most, to get one job out of them. I had gone to only two auditions and wanted both jobs. When I sang for the Santa Fe Opera, I had the intention of returning as a second-year apprentice. When I sang for the Virginia Opera, I had the intention of understudying the role of Carmen and singing in their year-long apprentice and outreach program. Though I accepted a contract for the coming summer with the Santa Fe Opera, I didn't receive a callback for the Virginia Opera. I believed that my prayers to the Gohonzon would bring about the best for my happiness. I decided to trust the outcome of my auditions.

While participating in SGI-USA youth activities, I met a group of incredible young women. At the community center one day, one asked me if I would be interested in going to the organization's Arts Division conference at the SGI-USA Florida Nature and Culture Center in the spring of 2000. I didn't really know what the FNCC was, but I decided to attend. I began saving the money I was earning at my job at Starbucks.

It was an amazing conference. I met artists from all over the United States and had an opportunity to talk with SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima. I explained my situation, dreams and worries to him about going out into a world of unknowns and uncertainties. He was understanding and compassionate, and he suggested that I think of all the lives I could touch with my voice and talent. He urged me to remember that my

professional success to date was a result of all the causes I had made to study and hone my craft and that it would be a waste to not continue in that vein. He encouraged me to “sing for kosen-rufu” and “be the Madonna of the opera world.” I determined at that moment to sing for world peace and the happiness of humanity.

I left for Santa Fe shortly after the conference and had a great summer there, professionally and personally. My environment was mirroring the incredible changes I had been making in my life. My inner human revolution was reflected in the lovely relationships I was building with colleagues and the honors I received being cast in huge roles in the apprentice showcase.

I finished the season with the Santa Fe Opera and moved back to my parents’ home in Maryland. I made up my mind to move to New York and do what was necessary to have an opera career: audition, audition and audition. One week before I was to make the dreaded move to a life of temping and waitressing to fund my auditioning, I received a call from the Virginia Opera. One of their mezzo-sopranos wasn’t working out and they wanted to know if I would be available to understudy the role of Carmen and sing with their Young Artists Program through June 2001. I couldn’t believe my fortune! Not only did I not have to move to New York; it turned out that I had been offered the very contract for which I had auditioned in November. My exact prayers had been answered!

I moved to Norfolk, Virginia and began working with the company on the day I arrived. I am thrilled to be singing for a living. I am paid well and my housing is provided. I learned the entire role of Carmen and am touring with several members of the company in the state of Virginia. I work with elementary school children who have learned the songs and speaking lines to a children’s opera called Cinderella, and after lunch, we perform the opera for the entire school. Talk about singing for kosen-rufu! I love working with such beautiful, pure children every day, and I chant to touch their lives.

Recently, I was in a supermarket looking for Ben & Jerry’s ice cream. As I stood at the freezer contemplating which flavor to buy, my glance fell upon a little girl with a huge smile running toward me. She gave me a hug and I realized that she had been involved in a performance of Cinderella the week before. I had touched her life and was receiving the affection and joy of a trusting child!

My practice has allowed me to experience such incredible gifts of humanity. My determination is to forever sing for world peace and the happiness of humanity.

Email Natalie at natalia9_1971@yahoo.com or to the editors at livingb1@aol.com.