

LIVING MY “RIGHT LIFE”

BY JAMES LECESNE, NEW YORK CITY

When I became a Buddhist in 1984, I didn't understand the significance of what I was doing. Though someone may have mentioned the idea of realizing my Buddhahood or the possibility of achieving a state of true happiness or the likelihood that I might discover my “true nature,” or find wisdom, I wasn't listening. Like many people, I accepted Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism because I desperately wanted to upgrade the circumstances of my life. For nearly ten years I had been struggling as an actor and writer while holding onto some vague notion that I would someday make a significant contribution to the world through my work. But at thirty-four, I felt that time was running out. If I didn't show some actual proof very soon, it would be too late. I needed a change.

Within a year of beginning to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, my life had indeed changed. Many of my dreams were in the process of being realized and I felt that I was on my way to living the life I had always imagined for myself. I had just completed my first professional writing assignment at Radio City Music Hall; I was about to star in my own one-person show off-Broadway; and I was in a relationship that I considered stable and nurturing. It was an exciting time, one that seemed full of promise.

That's when I decided to stop chanting. The decision was purely practical. I told myself that the physical strain of doing eight shows a week was too much, and felt that chanting would have to wait. I convinced myself that Buddhism wasn't really responsible for my improved conditions, and reasoned that things would have turned out the same way whether I had been chanting or not. Perseverance, fate, hard work — these were the elements that had caused my life to happen — not Buddhism. At the time, I never stopped to consider the connection between my practice and the improved conditions of my life. I was blind to the fact that chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo every day had brought about a change just as I had hoped it might. Of course, looking back on it all today, I can see that the real reason I stopped chanting was that my true nature was about to be revealed, and I wasn't quite ready.

Two months after I stopped chanting, my show unexpectedly closed, my relationship ended and I was literally out on the streets looking for a job and a place to live. It was a difficult time for me, one that caused me to blame myself as well as others for the sudden downturn of my fortune. Though I always kept the Gohonzon with me as I traveled from one apartment to the next, I never chanted in front of it and certainly didn't recognize its potential power. I was similarly blind to my own potential at the time.

Seven years passed.

Then one afternoon, while I was complaining about my life over coffee with my friend Eve, she suggested that we go back to her apartment and begin chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

I told her the whole story, and explained why I didn't see much sense to the practice. In my mind, it was simply proof that you had to be careful what you prayed for because it only led to disappointment. She then pointed out the one obvious fact that I had failed to consider during the previous seven years: when I was chanting my life seemed to improve, but when I stopped my life got more difficult. Eve suggested that I might want to try chanting again, as an experiment, just to see if things improved. This way I could test the law of cause and effect using chanting and my own life.

It was as if someone had diagrammed the most basic mathematical equation to me, an equation that had always been there, had always been true. But because I lacked the basic

wisdom to add it up, the simple law of cause and effect had remained hidden from me, a mystery in the midst of my own life.

I went home that afternoon and immediately re-enshrined the Gohonzon. It was a matter of days (three, to be exact) before my life began to respond. Opportunities presented themselves with miraculous speed, and those little mystical connections began to happen more frequently. It was as though I had plugged into some kind of electrical current and my life was now receiving a sudden jolt of juice. Opportunities to write and perform started to come my way. I began running workshops at a drop-in center designed for people with life-threatening illness, and was soon offered a job there. For the first time in seven years I recognized my own “right life.”

But that was just the beginning.

One morning while listening to the radio, I happened to hear a report about teenage suicide. I was astounded to learn that more than thirty-three percent of reported suicides in this country are related to homosexuality. My immediate thought was, “Why isn’t anyone doing anything to convince these young people that their lives are valuable? Why isn’t anyone reaching out to remind them that they are perfect just as they are?” Then I began to remember my own difficult adolescence, the pain of feeling ashamed and different, the awareness that I lived slightly on the outside of everything just because of my sexual orientation.

From the time I was a very young boy I knew that this difference was an essential part of who I happened to be. It wasn’t something I had chosen; it was simply who I was. It influenced the way I perceived the people, places and things around me, and also the way in which I allowed myself to participate in the world at large. It was, in fact, part and parcel of my true nature. I could no more divest myself of my homosexuality than I could deny the color of my skin or refuse the fact that I was born. It hasn’t always been easy to accept this difference, but at the same time it has contributed to my ability as an artist, a lover — even as a Buddha.

In his writings, Nichiren Daishonin defines reality as “the true nature of all phenomena.” One of the most astonishing benefits of being a human being and a Buddhist is that I have been given the opportunity to discover for myself the true nature of this phenomenon. I have experienced this through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and by asking myself what it is about me that is unique, what must I do in this world that has never been done before, and how can I manifest the most perfect expression of my self? Chanting has enabled me to bring forth this reality from the depths of my life, not only so that I can perceive it, but so that others can perceive it as well.

The day I heard that radio report I sat down and wrote a theater piece. It was about a thirteen-year-old boy named Trevor who, through a series of diary entries, begins to recognize his sexuality and feel his difference in the world. Despite rejection by his friends, misunderstanding by his parents, and an unsuccessful attempt at suicide, Trevor triumphs and chooses to live another day.

This humorous and moving account of one gay boy’s coming of age and his determination to survive became part of a one-person show that I performed called “Word of Mouth” (see photo page 44). Presented off-Broadway, the show was a big success, and I was awarded The New York Drama Desk Award and The Outer Circle Critics Award for best solo performance in New York in 1995.

“Trevor” then went on to inspire the making of a short film, which won the Academy Award for Best Live Action Short, as well as awards at The Berlin, The Hamptons and The Sundance Film Festivals. “Trevor” was having such an enormous impact on people, not just because of its timely subject matter and positive message, but also because it was a reflection of many people’s

struggle to reveal their “true nature” and to value their own particular difference in the world.

When HBO decided to broadcast the film in 1998, I worked with filmmakers Peggy Rajski and Randy Stone to create a non-profit organization and begin operation of the first (and only) national 24-hour toll-free suicide prevention hotline (800-850-8078) for gay, lesbian, transgender and questioning youth. Named *The Trevor Helpline*, the hotline received more than 1,500 calls from teens around the country in its first two weeks of operation; and calls continue to come in at the rate of approximately 150 per week. The Web site (www.trevorproject.org) averages approximately 5,000 hits a month, and our sixteen-minute film is now shown regularly on HBO in a special presentation hosted by Ellen DeGeneres. The Trevor Helpline, with its national 800 number, is made available to anyone who feels they might be in need of it.

Though the story of Trevor may have sprung from the depths of my own life, it has miraculously reached out to span both time and space, touching others, and in some cases, saving lives. We’ve enlisted people within the entertainment industry such as Sting, Jodie Foster, Martin Scorsese and Diana Ross, who generously gave their talents, money and support toward the making of this film. And celebrities such as, Gillian Anderson, Joy Behar, Drew Carey and Margaret Cho have helped us to raise money for The Trevor Helpline by appearing at benefit performances in both Los Angeles and in New York City.

When I first started chanting in 1984, all I knew was that I wanted to change my life. Perhaps I also wanted to change myself. But the Buddhism of the Daishonin has taught me, first hand, that no one needs to change who they are in order to be a Bodhisattva of the Earth or to realize him- or herself as a Buddha in this life. By embracing every aspect of our true nature we can turn the very things that threatened to poison our lives into medicine — not only for ourselves, but also for others. In my case, the shame, confusion and frustration I once felt about being openly gay in the very public world of show business was transformed through my Buddhist practice into something beneficial, something to celebrate and something I cannot imagine living without.

In his letter titled “The Essentials of Attaining Buddhahood,” Nichiren Daishonin writes: “Is it not the meaning of the sutra and the commentary that the way to Buddhahood lies within the two elements of reality and wisdom? Reality means the true nature of all phenomena, and wisdom means the illuminating and manifesting of this true nature. ... When this reality and wisdom are fused, one attains Buddhahood in one’s present form” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 746).

Certainly this should encourage each of us to continually strive not only to identify our true nature, but also to develop the wisdom to see that nature manifest in the world. I have learned that I don’t ever have to change or deny who I am to make my dreams a reality. I have everything I need to become a Buddha in this world — in my present form.