

PRAYING FOR THE PEACE OF LIBERIA
AUGUSTINE BLANGO, WILLINGBORO, NEW JERSEY
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In December 1989, civil war broke out in Liberia. Over the next seven years, hundreds of thousands died from wounds and disease, and millions of people were forced to leave their homes. Among the refugees were Augustine Blango and his family.

“My wife and I left our home to try to find a place safe from the fighting. With us were our two children and seven other family members. We had no place to go. The rebels were shooting at people in the streets so I decided to take everyone to the army barracks for safety. My wife asked me what I was going to do with the Gohonzon. Since the rebels were shooting at people who were carrying anything in their hands, I told her that the Buddhist gods would protect us, and put the Gohonzon inside my sock. We saw many people in front of us, but we passed through the rebel checkpoint without incident and were able to reach the barracks safely.”

Augustine had joined the Soka Gakkai International in 1982, when his older brother Sam came back to Liberia for a visit. Sam had become a Buddhist in 1974 in the United States while he was a student in Philadelphia. He had married an American woman, Judy Tomsy, and had become an American citizen, but he still felt close ties to Liberia, where he had left many family members including two small sons.

“Sam told me that if I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I would get whatever I needed in my life. He took me to a Buddhist meeting in Liberia and connected me with Harry Cooper, the leader of the Liberian members. I was twenty-one at the time and living temporarily with my other brother, Washington. I didn’t have a Gohonzon, so I chanted at our meeting place or at my leader’s house. At that time, it took three or four years to receive a Gohonzon.”

Augustine soon received an invitation from Sam and Judy to visit them in the United States. He went to the U.S. Embassy to apply for a visitor’s visa, but the consul refused to issue one because he did not believe that the young man would return to Africa.

“I was so disappointed and went right away to my Buddhist leader. He told me to chant to try to understand. He said that this must not be the right time for me to leave Liberia for the United States. I told him that I had to go to the United States, no matter how long it took. That was my determination.”

During the next couple of years, Augustine had trouble practicing because he had no permanent place to live; he was sleeping at the homes of various relatives and friends. In 1985, he finally received the Gohonzon, but he still did not have a place of his own where he could enshrine it.

“I was encouraged by a senior in faith to chant two hours a day to find a home of my own, and I put this guidance into practice for six months. In February 1986, I met a young woman whom I married, and in December that year we had our daughter, the first of our four children. Of course, I told her that I was a Buddhist and chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. She accepted my religion, even though she didn’t chant herself. I was doing construction work at the time, but the pay was not very good, and we could not afford a home. My wife said that this was no problem; she would ask her father to give us a house to live in. Finally, in 1987, I had a house of my own and was able to enshrine the Gohonzon. I began to chant more, one hour a day for the next seven months.”

Sam and Judy Blango again asked Augustine to visit them in the U. S. Augustine went back to the American Embassy, where the consul asked him how much money he had in the bank

for his trip. Augustine told him that he would be staying with American relatives, but the consul again refused him a visa. Again he was advised to continue chanting no matter what happened.

Then in 1989 war broke out.

The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), a dissident group led by Charles Taylor, had an army of ten thousand, mostly new recruits with little training. They soon controlled the countryside and then took over the capital, Monrovia, which was named for James Monroe, the U.S. president in 1816 when the American Colonization Society established Liberia as a place for freed African-American slaves to be “resettled.” Most of these freed slaves had some white ancestry and were therefore lighter-skinned than the native people of the region, who belonged to sixteen different tribes, including the Krahn ancestors of Augustine and Sam Blango.

Like much of Africa, Liberia is still in the process of recovering from centuries of war, slavery, conquest and colonization. Liberia’s historic conflicts have been between the descendants of the American “settlers” and the indigenous people who were treated like second-class citizens and even used for forced labor until well into the twentieth century. Even after racial discrimination was outlawed in 1958, conflict and an impoverished economy troubled the nation, and in 1980 the army staged a bloody coup and set up Samuel K. Doe as president. Doe suspended the constitution, destroyed the economy, and ruled as a dictator. The 1989 rebellion aimed at his overthrow.

After fleeing their home, Augustine and his family lived in the army barracks for the next six months.

“When we came to the barracks, we had no food or water with us. We had to drink dirty water from the swamp and eat plant leaves and green grass. There were nearly 30,000 people seeking protection there without food or fresh water. The rebels continued shooting; every day fifty or sixty people died from gunshot wounds or disease. One time, I was standing outside when a soldier ran up to me out of the blue and warned me to leave the area because the rebels were firing in our direction. I had just moved one step to the side when a bullet whizzed past my ear and killed the man standing directly in back of me. The soldier who had warned me and saved my life told me that I must have a long life to live. I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo three times in my heart with ever-deepening appreciation before leaving the area.

“When I returned to my family, I found that my nephew and my son were near death from cholera, caused by polluted water and lack of food. There was no medicine available so I chanted in my heart and went out in search of some. Fortunately, I came across a doctor who treated the two boys, saving them. We were finally able to leave the barracks safely when ECOMOG [the West African Peacekeeping Force] stepped in to halt the fighting.”

ECOMOG was a monitoring group set up by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), including Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Gambia and Kenya. The peace it brought was short-lived. In September 1990 a splinter group of the NPFL captured and executed Samuel Doe, just as he had executed his predecessor. The splinter groups multiplied on all sides, and fighting intensified, making life even more treacherous for the civilian population. The insurgents often executed civilians who refused to join them and recruited boys as young as eight to join their ranks. Transportation and communication became increasingly difficult even in the capital city.

In 1991, Augustine decided to leave Monrovia for Sierra Leone so that he could communicate with Sam and once again try to find a way to the U.S. He found a small boat owner who was offering to carry refugees out of the city. By the time the boat sailed, there were nearly 200 people on board, with no room for food or supplies and no radio. As they sailed out of the harbor the rebels started to shoot at them, and the boat sailed further and further out to

sea, where it became lost. For three days the refugees saw no one, but finally a Guinean Coast Guard ship appeared, with two ECOMOG representatives on board. They had been searching for the lost boat, but when they radioed their headquarters in Guinea the government refused to allow them to bring the refugees ashore. In despair, they set sail early in the morning of their fourth day and that evening landed in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, where they were taken to a refugee camp.

“When I arrived in Sierra Leone, I had no idea where to find the Buddhist members, but I was at least able to talk to my brother Sam on the telephone. One day, a friend of mine suggested we walk around Freetown, and just by coincidence we ran into a Buddhist friend from Liberia. He directed me to the Buddhist leader’s house, and I started attending meetings. I introduced my friend to chanting and together we did Buddhist activities in Freetown for eight months. During that time, I introduced three more people to Buddhism and encouraged five former members to return to their Buddhist practice.”

In late 1991, the Liberian rebels came to Sierra Leone and civil war broke out there as well. Augustine returned to Liberia. Later on, he went to Ghana to try to reestablish communications with Sam. Again, he lived in a refugee camp.

“During the three weeks that I spent there, I found some Liberian members who were no longer practicing. I chanted with them for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening, and some of them decided to return to the practice. I also introduced some new people to Buddhism. I got hold of some new study material from the Ghana Community Center before returning to my family in Liberia.”

In 1994, Sam and Judy found out that Liberian refugees were being resettled from the Ivory Coast to the United States under the United Nations Refugee Resettlement program. Augustine decided to take his family to the Ivory Coast, but when they arrived, the UN representative told them that there would be a two-year wait because there were so many refugees ahead of them. Even though there were about five hundred SGI members in the Ivory Coast, their meetings were all in French, and Augustine didn’t know the language.

“Things weren’t going well at all. I became discouraged and started to slack off in my practice. Eventually, though, I did start to do Buddhist activities with the Ivory Coast members, and I learned to speak a little French. I began to visit members at home to tell them about the benefits of the Buddhist practice, and some of the members who had stopped practicing began chanting again. My district in Abidjan had twenty members when I arrived, but by the time I left there were thirty. The leaders there put me in charge of teaching the members the Buddhist prayers, which I did every Friday night.”