

AN UNCOMMON WOMAN BY LILY AJDAR, LOS ANGELES

Lily Ajdar and her two sons fled Iran to escape the Iranian Islamic Revolution. In the United States they found true freedom in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

I grew up in Iran, a traditional Islamic country, during a time when life was becoming very free and Westernized. From the 1920s Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, encouraged women to integrate into society and to know our rights, such as the right to dress as we wished, to divorce, to have a job, and the right to our children. At the time, many religious people didn't want to change their traditional Islamic ways; for example, women were expected to be covered head to toe when in public. However, the intellectuals willingly embraced this new liberation and the government's attempt to modernize. From the time I was born until the beginning of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, I never experienced the oppression of a religious government and my family freely chose to practice Islam.

Fortunately, my mother, being the free-spirited woman that she was, insisted that my four sisters and I become independent. She encouraged us — especially me, since I was the oldest daughter — to receive a university education so that we would be financially independent. She wanted us to work, so when we married, our husbands would have to accept us as we were. And if anything ever happened to them, we could care for ourselves and our families.

After high school, I began teaching at an elementary school. Following my mother's advice, I attended one of the first co-ed universities at night, which was uncommon, to receive my bachelor's degree in business administration. Though my father was traditional and opposed the liberal lifestyle of his eldest daughter, I was determined and challenged his resistance. I was even the first woman to buy a car at the university.

Later, I married and had two beautiful children. Eventually, I began teaching statistics and economics at a women's high school in Tehran.

After the Islamic Revolution began in 1979, what limited rights women developed were totally disregarded by the religious authorities. Among other things, women once again were forced to cover themselves in public. These changes were devastating. Many people tried to fight back but were imprisoned or persecuted.

The new government severely regulated education and our curriculum became heavily dominated by fundamentalist Islamic teachings. Because I believed what was happening was wrong, I constantly challenged the system. I tried to teach my students that this fundamentalism was unhealthy. I wanted them to know that studying Islam was fine, but we also needed to broaden our minds, to learn other economic, political and social philosophies to cope with the reality of the world.

My family had many luxuries, and I did not have to fight for change in society. But without freedom, I knew the repressed environment would eventually cause us suffering.

Life in Iran progressively worsened.

In March 1982, I vividly recall celebrating Iranian New Year's Eve, when suddenly our family's feast was ruined by a savage Iraqi attack. Many innocent children and people were killed in Tehran. Because of the mandatory military recruitment for young boys age fifteen and older, I feared for my two sons' lives. It was at that time, under the air raids, looking at the terrified eyes of my children, that I made a resolution: I will depart from this misery forever.

Leaving Iran was not easy. I faced many challenges emotionally, politically and legally. I

suffered the loss of my father in an auto accident during the air raids, and convincing my husband, Behrouz, to let me get a passport to leave the country was no small feat. He was in the military and would not leave Iran. Although Behrouz wanted the children and me to be happy, he was afraid that we'd grow apart and never be reunited if we left. But finally in 1983, I convinced my husband to help me flee the country with my two sons to France.

Over the course of four years, I tried to make a new start for my family, while continuing to follow my own dreams. I began learning the French language and culture, and applied to a master's program in economics at a university in Paris. I started a small but successful business that provided a good living for us.

Behrouz joined us two years later but couldn't accept our freedom and the many changes in our lives. He asked me to return to Iran. When I refused, he threatened to take the children back to Iran. The next few years I lived in fear of the future and became deeply depressed. I couldn't sleep at night, even with a handful of sleeping pills. However, I continued making efforts to protect myself, my children and our future.

In July 1988, in spite of my husband's opposition, I emigrated with my two sons to Los Angeles.

That August my oldest son, Ali, was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism outside our apartment. He wasn't interested, but he gave me the contact information. I invited myself to a meeting. The sincerity of the people I met inspired me and I desperately started to practice because I wanted to be happy. After two weeks of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I felt so peaceful that I could sleep without medication. Within two months of chanting, my mother and sister joined us in Los Angeles from Iran, the answer to one of my first prayers.

Then an onslaught of challenges surfaced. During the first week of her arrival in the States, my sister, who had been tortured by the authoritarian government in Iran, fell into a deep depression and was hospitalized. Also my mother began complaining of strange headaches. Nine months later she was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer and given two months to live.

Furthermore, my husband began interfering in my life. He tried to turn my teenage sons against me. Behrouz was against me practicing and helping my sister and mother, because it was draining all of our finances; he wanted us to return to Paris. Fearing that he might try to prevent me from practicing, when he stopped supporting us financially, I decided to divorce him. Of course, my children were upset by our circumstances and began blaming me for all our problems. On top of this, cultural conflict was a big challenge for all of us. I prayed that one day my sons would understand my faith.

I became negative about everything. My life was so dark that for months I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror. My problems were overwhelming. Things seemed to just be getting worse even though I was chanting three hours every night.

In the middle of this stormy life, all I had was my Buddhist practice and my friends in the SGI-USA. One night in a desperate state, I read the following passage from Nichiren Daishonin in the *World Tribune*: "One may ask why the results of these vows should be so long in appearing. And yet, though one might point at the earth and miss it, though one might bind up the sky, though the tides might cease to ebb and flow and the sun rise in the west, it could never come about that the prayers of the practitioner of the Lotus Sutra would go unanswered" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 345).

The conviction of the Daishonin's words struck my life. I felt hope and believed that I could make it. I had the key, now I needed patience and perseverance. At this time, my sons began supporting my practice, and my mother and sister started to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

After a few months, my sister was released from the hospital and over time regained her

health through the practice of faith. We all chanted for my mother to overcome her brain tumor and through strong prayer, chemotherapy and radiation, she extended her life by eight years. In helping my family, I started realizing the power of my own life and practice.

In February 1990, I experienced a transformation when I saw SGI President Ikeda for the first time in a telecast meeting. I remember he spoke out against authoritarianism — a theme that was all too familiar in my life. I was electrified by this encounter, and immediately felt an unshakable trust toward him. I told myself this is the man I have to follow — he is my mentor. All those hardships I faced seemed to lead me to this point. The sun had begun rising in my heart, all the darkness vanished immediately. This mystic encounter shaped my life; since then I have never felt lonely in this world.

As the SGI conflict with the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood manifested in 1991, I came to realize that every event in my life from my husband's opposition to financial problems led to my understanding of challenging authoritarianism. Because I experienced religious authoritarianism in Iran, I naturally devoted myself to understanding this issue in the SGI and encouraged others to do so. My sons also got seriously involved with such activities, and as a result, a unity for kosen-rufu started to take shape in my family. As mother and sons, we became comrades in faith as well.

Now my sons, who were once too young to understand my heart, are my best friends and support me in any way they can. Three years ago, I wrote a poem about my life for President Ikeda. After reading it, my younger son, Amir, with tears in his eyes told me: "Now I understand your heart. Thank you, Mom, for everything you've done for us." There's no greater happiness for me than knowing my sons are awakening to their mission and the purpose of our journey and hardships.

Having freed myself from all my family burdens, I decided to fulfill one of my dreams. After much preparation, last year I entered a master's program in international relations at Cal State, Los Angeles. Although it took a lot of courage, I overcame fears concerning my English language ability and competing with younger students. I learned from reading President Ikeda's guidance to be true to myself and never give up on my dreams.

I have to mention that I am not merely seeking a degree. Rather, learning about political issues refreshes my mind and increases my awareness of the world. Eventually I hope to use this knowledge to contribute to world peace.

Since the beginning of my practice fourteen years ago, I have climbed many steep mountains. Many people asked me how I could continue. My answer: It is the deep joy and fulfillment that I gained from my Buddhist practice, and the deep connection that I have built with my mentor Daisaku Ikeda.