

## **EXPERIENCE—TERRI JOHNSON, NEW YORK CITY CLEARING THE DARK CLOUDS OF DEPRESSION**

**Based on her Buddhist practice, Terri Johnson overcomes chronic depression through therapy and medication.**

I can remember being depressed and afraid of life as early as age 3. By 13, I was contemplating suicide, and at 17, I made an attempt. Though I had some brief experiences with psychotherapy, it helped very little other than to confirm that I had a problem with chronic depression.

One constant love in my life, however, was art. I loved to draw and designed my first Chanel-type suit in the third grade. I was so proud of its unusual colors, olive green with turquoise blue trim.

I went to college and received a fine arts degree in fashion design. Unfortunately, the real world inserted its ugly head again, and I couldn't get a job in my field, even though I had graduated with honors. My first job was in the garment center, as a secretary, in 1974.

Around that time, I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I was intrigued and decided to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to overcome my depression.

Within my first week of practice, I had many obstacles, including losing my job and coming down with laryngitis. But with the encouragement of many members, I continued because I was told that if I chanted, I could definitely become happy. I learned early on that obstacles are sources of growth and must be challenged.

My biggest target was my underlying depression and thoughts of suicide that hadn't yet been cured by therapy. As a cause to change my illness, I chanted and participated in many SGI activities. I took responsibility within the organization, shared Buddhism with others, and danced and sewed costumes for various SGI-USA culture festivals. Much of this I did in the midst of depression, fighting tears and my fear of being around people.

There were other times when I could not chant at all. I experienced long periods of isolation, where for a month I would not answer the phone or leave the house. During these times, I remember being told that if I was too depressed to do gongyo, simply chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo even once or a few times would be a powerful cause toward my happiness. Though the days were dark, I eventually would come out of the depression enough to get back to work.

In 1981, I finally began working as a fashion designer, which for me was "happiness," but my old friend depression was once again consuming me, and I could not handle it alone.

I started therapy again, chanting the whole time to overcome this chronic depression. But my life fell completely apart, and I ended up in the psychiatric wing of a hospital for a month. I remember asking a friend in faith whom I trusted why this was happening if my Buddhist practice was so strong. She encouraged me, saying my life was strong enough to deal with the problem and eradicate it. I wanted to believe her, though it was hard. Still, I managed to return to the prime point of why I began practicing: I simply had to overcome my depression.

When the hospital released me, they referred me to a new doctor, a psychiatrist, for outpatient care. My first question to her was "Why, of all the times I struggled with

depression, had this bout been so serious that I ended up in the hospital?”

Her reply sounded very Buddhist: “Because no one ever found the true cause of your illness.”

At that moment, I knew that my Buddhist practice had brought this new therapist and me together. I felt she would be instrumental in helping me finally get better.

Shortly after I was released from the hospital, I lost my design job and spent several years working as a temporary secretary, though I really hated the work. This made me even more depressed.

My life seemed an endless cycle of chanting for design jobs that I could not get, punctuated by going in and out of the hospital. Many doctors told me to give up my dream of being a designer, since I previously had only one job in my field. They believed that the reason I was depressed was because I was reaching for the impossible. Even my parents were telling me to get a nice, sensible job with a retirement plan because the highs and lows of the garment industry were too stressful.

I reminded myself, “The point of practicing Buddhism is to achieve the impossible.”

I was in and out of the hospital—10 times to be exact. Each stay was shorter. In the mornings, I would get up early and go into one of the lounges to chant before the other patients woke up. My last hospital stay was for five days. Upon my release, I vowed never to return...and I haven't. That was more than 15 years ago.

When not in the hospital, I continued to do SGI activities, even though much of the time I was suffering great internal pain. Chanting was not easy. I felt like staying home curled up in a little ball hiding from the world. One treasured memory I have is making the costumes for a culture festival in Texas. I did not attend the festival because I was in the hospital again, but I received a gift from SGI President Ikeda for my efforts. I was astonished that he recognized me, because I valued myself so little.

As I chanted about my feelings, I experienced a turning point. I realized that I equated my self-worth with the work I did. I loved working as a designer, so temporary work was excruciating for me. My challenge was to value my life no matter what work I did.

A quote from Nichiren Daishonin helped me understand the value of my life: “When deluded, one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened, one is called a Buddha. This is similar to a tarnished mirror that will shine like a jewel when polished. A mind now clouded by the illusions of the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but when polished, it is sure to become like a clear mirror, reflecting the essential nature of phenomena and the true aspect of reality” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 4). I chanted to see that I was a Buddha. I was also still chanting to get back into the garment industry as a designer.

As time progressed, doctors determined that my depression was due to a chemical imbalance. I had been put on many different medications, which would work, but only temporarily.

Finally, the right combination of medications was found, so my condition stabilized. I worked hard with my therapist to change negative thought and behavior patterns that had built up over the years. For example, even though I was stabilized, during periods of stress, I would revert back to suicidal thoughts. Counseling helped me challenge these thoughts.

My therapist also helped me view my illness and my Buddhist practice differently. I thought that because I practiced Buddhism, my goal should be to get well without medication; that my faith wasn't strong unless I could overcome the illness without it. So I chanted to change my brain chemistry.

Every time I went to the doctor, I would ask when I could stop the medication. But over a period of years, I realized that the medication was what I needed to be balanced chemically—it did not make me a weak person.

While I was chanting one evening, I realized that my prayer about my brain chemistry had been answered. Because of scientific advancement, the correct medication for balancing my brain chemistry was now available to me. It occurred to me that I had been seeking the answer to my prayer based on a narrow perspective.

In 1985, I got work again as a designer for a line of clothing sold nationwide. Though the job lacked creativity, it was a stepping stone. I continued to struggle for years, determined to be more creative and use my design skills. I also began to work as a fine artist.

Four-and-a-half years ago, I got a break and landed a great job designing sweaters for a company that produces an exclusive line sold nationwide through Home Shoppers Network television. I am also in the process of finalizing the details of a line of sweaters with my own label. In addition to this, my paintings have been shown and sold in galleries in New York City and Washington, D.C.

The joy of my job does not leave me problem-free. I still have an occasional day when I get depressed. I can feel the depression coming on the same way you might feel a cold coming on. The difference is, now I know how to manage my condition, and I know it's not going to last forever. I give myself 24 hours to feel down as a way to acknowledge, instead of suppress, my feelings. Then I get in front of the Gohonzon to chant. Chanting gives me the wisdom to know if I can challenge the depression with my practice alone or if I need the additional support of a doctor's visit and/or a medication adjustment.

Since I began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism 26 years ago, the biggest benefit I have received is that I wake up every day happy to be me and alive. I know I have overcome my chronic depression because of my Buddhist practice—my psychiatrist can vouch for my stable condition. Without this practice, I sincerely believe I would not be alive today.

When I chant, I overflow with appreciation for the Gohonzon and for my life. I want to thank all the people who have encouraged me throughout my practice, and I pledge to create the kind of life that will encourage others to achieve their impossible dreams.