

## EXPERIENCE—KEITH AND REBECCA THOMAS, MADISON, N.J. THREE DECADES OF FAMILY REVOLUTION

**Twenty-six years of marriage and Buddhist practice have left the Thomas family stronger and happier. But this was not always the case.**

**Keith Thomas:** The casual observer, viewing our happy family from the outside, would see four people living the great American dream. My wife, Rebecca, and I have been married for 26 years. We have two beautiful, healthy daughters. We have a charming house in Madison, N.J., good jobs, close friends, two cars, a 401(k) plan, a golden retriever named Sophie and a cat named Tabby. But believe me, it was not always this way.

When I received the Gohonzon in 1971, I was a disillusioned, burnt-out, 24-year-old rock musician. The plot thickened years later when I met Rebecca and introduced her to the practice.

**Rebecca Thomas:** Keith introduced me to Buddhism in July 1974 and asked me to marry him in August. Even though we had known each other less than a month, I said yes. This turned out to be my greatest benefit because throughout our 26-year marriage, Keith has always practiced consistently. He never gave up, while I, on the other hand, haven't always had a consistent practice.

**Keith:** For the next six years we practiced together vigorously. In 1980, our first daughter, Eliza, was born. At the time I worked in network and cable television. I was also an actor and a stand-up comic. I worked long hours at the station, and when I wasn't there, I was doing stand-up comedy. I consistently performed gongyo and daimoku, studied, and in my free time I would attend discussion meetings and do home visits. I thought I was doing my best, but as time went by, Becky started resenting me. She wanted me to spend more time with her and Eliza.

**Rebecca:** Things continued this way for four years, until I was so full of anger I stopped practicing, and life became miserable. We fought all the time in front of our daughter. On Eliza's fifth birthday she actually stepped in-between us during a heated argument and cried, "I can't believe you are fighting on my fifth birthday!"

But through it all, Keith continued to practice consistently.

Eventually, Keith quit his job in television and began to do comedy full time. Since one of us had to make real money, I opened an exercise studio in Manhattan and began running a business. I became the main breadwinner in our family. By the time our second daughter, Kate, was born in 1989, the tension between us was so thick you could cut it with a knife. I thought I could get through life on sheer determination until 1992, when I faced a series of crises I simply couldn't handle on my own.

**Keith:** Eliza was 12 and had become involved with gangs, cutting school and hanging out on the streets of Manhattan. We were horrified. At one point, Eliza even threatened me with a kitchen knife during one of our many arguments. Rebecca and I decided that for our daughter's sake, we'd move out of Manhattan. But having lived there for 20 years, we

had absolutely no idea where to go. At that time, our SGI-USA leader was living in Madison, N.J., and he told us it was a wonderful place to raise children.

**Rebecca:** It was at this point, I found out that my younger sister, Rachel, was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of breast cancer. I was devastated. In the midst of all of the chaos I began flying back and forth between New York and Florida to care for her. On one of my last trips, Keith came with me. Rachel, who was only 40 and suffering terribly, asked us to chant with her. Rachel had never before shown the slightest interest in chanting. Even though I wasn't practicing, I was so happy that my sister wanted to chant before she died. The three of us chanted together.

Rachel died on Nov. 27, 1993, the day after Thanksgiving. I returned home after burying my sister, wanting only some time and space to heal. But the losses in my life continued relentlessly. My fitness business, the main support for our family, was crumbling. The house we planned to buy got pulled out from under us. We were now faced with no income and no roof over our heads. Then I found out that at age 43 I was pregnant, only to discover that it was a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy.

I felt desperate and I knew things could not continue this way. I had just been with my sister, who at the end of her life wanted to chant. Even though I had the Gohonzon in my immediate environment for over two decades, perhaps I did not see what she saw. There is something very special and powerful in this practice. But for it to work, you have to take action. If I wanted to see change and growth, I would have to practice consistently. If I couldn't see it at that moment, I probably never would.

With the encouragement of my leaders as well as many members, I did my first gongyo in over 10 years. Immediately—and I mean as soon as I resumed a consistent practice—conspicuous benefits and protection from the Buddhist gods emerged from the universe.

Against all odds, we were able to buy a new house in a better location in only a few days. The very same day that I closed my fitness business, Keith was hired as a sales account executive at Kinko's Corporation. The day after my business closed, I was able to start a lucrative personal training business. With the help of a wonderful therapist, Eliza began to turn her life around and ultimately went on to become class president for both her junior and senior years.

**Keith:** After working for Kinko's for four years, I left for a career with some exciting dot.com startups. These positions were short-lived, both financially and creatively. One of my bosses smoked four packs of cigarettes a day—I felt as if I was working in Chernobyl. The other one actually ran out of money and couldn't pay me for two weeks. We were under tremendous financial strain. Rebecca was in school working on her master's degree in occupational therapy at NYU and making very little money, and I was unemployed for six months. I too realized that things could not continue this way.

I went on a three-hour-a-day daimoku campaign and received guidance. I was told to chant to be true to myself and to not settle for less. It was also suggested that I apply Nichiren Daishonin's letter "General Stone Tiger," in which a warrior shoots an arrow at a stone he mistakes for the tiger that killed his mother. The warrior's belief is so firm the arrow penetrates the stone. If I wanted to end the cycle of strain and suffering, my belief had to be stronger than ever before. With Nichiren Daishonin's words as my touchstone, I continued to chant.

Three months later, still looking for a job, I saw a one-inch ad in *The New York Times*. I

applied and was hired as a sales marketing executive in a 9 billion-dollar firm. The company's core business is disaster recovery for the top eight banks in the world. The money is good and the benefits are better—health, vision, dental and more for the entire family. And these benefits started on day one, the same day and month that our previous benefits ran out. Now, I enjoy going to work and I have an upbeat, non-smoking boss who is well-funded and not running out of money.

**Rebecca:** Our practice has not only helped us with our own dreams, but set a foundation for our family. Our oldest daughter, Eliza, is now flourishing at the University of Colorado in Boulder with a 3.6 average, and she's a published poet. She's practicing with the youth division, has received her own Gohonzon, and introduced her friends to the practice.

**Keith:** Finally, our youngest daughter, Kate, is a wonderful, bright student and an excellent writer. In her own wonderful way, she turned to us one day and said, "It is so great to have a practice that brings our whole family together." This makes me think of some favorite guidance by SGI President Ikeda, "In a family the sorrows are halved and the joys are multiplied."

Being among our true SGI family, we feel this more than ever.