

EXPERIENCE—SIBYL FORSBERG, LOS ANGELES STOPPING THE PATH OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

Overcoming depression and loss, Sibyl Forsberg discovers her true self and becomes happy.

My life up until I was 18 years old consisted of an absent father, a depressed mother who attempted suicide several times and a stepfather who committed suicide when I was 18.

After my stepfather died, my mother was never the same. Her mental and physical health weakened. I did my best to go on with my life but felt I was on the verge of following my stepfather and mother down the path of self-destruction. I battled depression during high school and college. Because I had such little confidence in myself, I had little aspiration or hope for the future. But I always remember as a little girl this feeling that some day I would be happy, though I had no idea how.

Meanwhile, I was finishing up my degree at UCLA, which is where I met Heidi in 1990. She was a Buddhist and became my very good friend. I was in awe of her because I clearly saw the difference between her amazing life-condition and my miserable one. She had problems, too, but seemed happy anyway, which did not make sense to me.

She took me to a Buddhist meeting immediately, but I insisted on enduring five more years of misery until I finally began to chant in June 1995. And what a relief it was. The first thing I noticed was a lightness in my body, like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders and my surroundings actually looked physically different to me. Colors literally looked brighter and more vibrant. It was truly inspiring. For the first time in my life, I started to have some hope. I thought that happiness was in the realm of possibility for me.

As my faith deepened, the next two years became very difficult. My mother made another attempt to take her own life four months after I started to chant. This just made me chant more. Slowly, I started to build confidence as I chanted for my mother's and my happiness. With this prayer, my self-destructive feelings also came to the surface like never before. Heidi and my boyfriend at the time reassured me that all this pain and suffering would turn into happiness. They told me my life was being purged of fundamental darkness and if I continued to chant and have faith, I would definitely break through. During all this suffering, I received great material benefits. Mostly though, I began to sincerely smile and feel joy, even in the midst of my struggle.

The year 1997 was a tough one to say the least. I was chanting three hours a day. My car was stolen, I was mugged at knifepoint, I lost my job and for seven months could not get another one, I went into severe financial debt and battled one flu after another. But worst of all, my mother's health and depression deteriorated. Her lupus and fibromyalgia became worse and she was in a car accident, causing her to need major back and neck surgery that left her disabled.

My relationship with my mother tore me up inside. My practice gave me clarity on how unhealthy our relationship was. I had spent my life taking care of my mom's feelings and realized that I needed to put boundaries between us. It was a constant struggle to do this. I battled feeling solely responsible for her health and happiness. But I knew that if I did not stay on this path, neither of us would be happy. Because I did not see her as much as she wanted, I experienced tremendous guilt.

Although I had taught her to chant and she did try it periodically, she mostly resented my dedication to Buddhism. I received guidance to chant for her unconditional happiness. Heidi encouraged me to join Bya-kuren (young women's behind-the-scenes group) and swore to me it would be the best way to fundamentally change my life, so I joined that year.

Then in February 1998, I received the most devastating news of my life. My mother had killed herself. I was in complete shock. The grieving I did for the next two years was the most intensely difficult time I had ever been through. I thought there was no other way but for me to die too. I believed my life was broken and could not be fixed. I continued to chant but felt hopeless and desperate for an answer about how to continue my life.

I sought the advice of a fellow SGI-USA senior leader who told me to chant to appreciate my life. During our meeting, I truly felt he understood my pain and somehow I believed in what he said. This was the beginning of seeing how all my suffering could be a benefit. With his support, I made a resolution to create value with my mother's suicide and to not perpetuate the cycle of self-destruction in my family. I spent the next three years chanting to appreciate my life and focusing on supporting others in their practice. Byakuren is a tremendous gift that saved my life.

I started to see and recognize the part of myself that I had tried for years to push down inside and ignore—my “over sensitivity.” I know that if my mother had not committed suicide, I would not have had to explore this part of myself so deeply. Now, as I embrace and acknowledge this part of myself, it doesn't run my life but rather enriches it. I feel I have learned to care for and love others in a way I never thought possible. This is because I truly started to appreciate my own life. I see SGI activities as a lifeline to my heart, as this is where I began to develop courage and feel compassion for others.

The following quote from SGI President Ikeda comforted me many times because I knew he understood me, so it helped me continue to fight for my happiness: “Buddhism lists the suffering of parting from one's loved ones as one of the eight types of suffering. In life, we will encounter separations of inexpressible sadness. However, those who overcome such grief and continue to live with strength and courage will be cherished and respected by their juniors as kings and queens of life. There is no more lofty life than that of one who surmounts personal tragedy and leaves behind some achievement for future generations.”

I can honestly say that much of my life now is joyful and I smile more than I ever have. I would bet my life on the wonders of this Buddhism because I know without it, I would not be who I am today—a person who never gives up on herself no matter how tough things get. I know there is always hope in any situation.