

EXPERIENCE—TAKAKO HASHIMOTO, CRYSTAL RIVER, FLA. MY HAPPINESS IS UP TO ME

After spending years rejecting the practice, Takako Hashimoto realizes how important it is to have Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in her life.

I grew up with the practice of Buddhism. A “fortune baby.” Many people knew me as a short, grinning little kid. But this was not always the case. I did not like going to SGI-USA meetings, hated being forced to sit in front of the Gohonzon and with my non-stop complaining, let my parents know it.

My take on things was often different than everyone else's. Since elementary school, my parents compared me to my older brother and sister: “Why don't you study hard like them? Why don't you chant and do gongyo like they do?” I would reply: “Don't compare me to them! Takako is Takako!” At such a young age, I seemed so sure of who I was. But the reality was different—I was miserable. And even more, I hated myself. My rough exterior was there to cover up the emptiness I felt inside.

Every day I would climb my tree in the yard and curse the world. I would think: “If I die, it would just make it easier for everyone. It would be one less human on the planet.” I kept these thoughts to myself, and no one knew what I was going through.

But at the age of 12, things began to change. I was attending a meeting in Washington, D.C., and for some reason, I began to listen to what was being said. I believe the lecture was about the Buddhist concept of the oneness of self and environment; how our actions influence our environment and visa-versa.

It dawned on me that my happiness was not to be realized in spite of me but because of me. It was all up to me to either change or to stay the same. Little by little, I began to do gongyo and chant daimoku on my own.

I have to admit I wasn't completely aware of how I was changing; I thought it was my environment changing. But it was, indeed, me. I started helping around the house more, cleaning things up, washing the dishes and saying “Thank you” to my parents. Of course, this was a shock to my mother. As a result, my world began to change. My mom was not annoying me as much, I got more focused on school and I got more involved with SGI-USA youth activities. I still had a temper, but I was no longer on an emotional roller coaster.

As I look back now, I also believe it was through reading many of SGI President Ikeda's speeches that I began to understand what appreciation meant to my life. I could see how much my parents had done and had to put up with over the years. No matter what I did or said, they loved me and supported me.

Because of my parents, my siblings and I were also given the chance to visit Japan and attend Soka University. While there, I had some memorable experiences.

I witnessed President Ikeda's sincere actions for others first hand. Not at large meetings or festivals but on a small scale with the students. He was incredibly supportive of the foreign students, always worried if we were adjusting to Japanese culture, the high cost of living and how our studies were coming along. Whether it was sending us certificates to buy books, chocolate during exams or ice cream on hot summer days, his attention touched the hearts of so many students—members and non-members—it was amazing to witness. I honestly believe there is no other place where the mentor's spirit can be felt

so strongly.

I also saw pure-spirited students challenging themselves every day to study and reply to President Ikeda and their families' expectations. Many of the students had to work every day to be able to eat and pay for transportation expenses. Watching their continuous efforts toward their goals was awe-inspiring, and sometimes, I felt small and weak in comparison. But based on President Ikeda's guidance, "It all comes down to what you do, not what anyone else does," I moved ahead. Instead of running away, I decided to support my friends.

Whenever I heard that one of the students in our dorm was feeling under the weather, I would make miso soup, packed with Japanese vegetables and tofu. I was there to support others when they were down, and they were there to encourage me to set my own goals and work harder.

I also had the fortune of traveling throughout Asia—with the support of my parents, of course. With the goal of making a global network of friends, I traveled to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea and different parts of Japan. I had many opportunities to visit SGI members and community centers, and gain a new perspective on our world peace movement.

I was so encouraged by my experiences abroad, I wanted to share them when I returned to the United States. I wrote a letter to the local paper in my hometown in South Carolina regarding my experiences with notes from my journal and pictures I had taken. To my surprise, the article was published. And this wasn't just a small column, but a large layout with color pictures.

I was born into a family that was practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, and for several years, I fought it. I wanted nothing to do with it. But when I realized how important it was for me, and how priceless my parents were for sharing Buddhism with me, so many things changed. So many things opened up. Including my heart. The once angry little girl is finally becoming sure of who she is.

This past May, I graduated from Clemson University with a degree in wildlife biology. Shortly thereafter, I started a job in Crystal River, Fla., with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I am very much looking forward to my new career and to helping strengthen the SGI-USA organization in my area.

I am determined to use everything that I have learned from my parents and the SGI to win in my new job and community. It's the least I can do for what my parents and the SGI have done for me.