

EXPERIENCE—TRUDE AND MICHAEL LISAGOR, VIENNA, VA. A MAJOR SHOT OF HOPE

Five years after Trude Lisagor was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she and her husband, Michael, reflect on how they have used their Buddhist practice to deal with the disease and to continue advancing.

Trude Lisagor: Last April, I walked six miles to raise money for multiple sclerosis research. What makes this noteworthy is that just five years ago, I could not walk at all.

Mike Lisagor: When we learned that Trude had MS, I was filled with a deep sense of loss for Trude, our two daughters and me. (I shared this experience in the Oct. 25, 1996, issue of the *World Tribune*.) Looking back five years later, I can hardly believe how many areas of our lives have positively developed as a result of this terrible illness.

Trude: In September 1996, MS entered my life like a tornado. In three days, my symptoms progressed from the tingly feeling of my feet falling asleep to an overwhelming numbness from my waist down. After a week in the hospital, slowly relearning how to walk, and reassuring my two daughters I was okay, the disturbing diagnosis of multiple sclerosis finally hit me. It caught me off guard and totally by surprise. It seemed as though everything—my family life, my career as a teacher, my practice with the SGI—would never be the same.

SGI President Ikeda once wrote: “No matter what happens, please continue to chant daimoku—both in good times and bad, irrespective of joys or sorrows, happiness or suffering. Then you will be able to seize victory in your daily life and in society” (*For Today & Tomorrow*, p. 319). After 27 rewarding years of Buddhist practice with Mike, I took President Ikeda’s words to heart and put my full energy into chanting, studying and sharing with others.

Mike: I watched Trude challenge her recovery with astonishing determination both in terms of chanting daimoku for her spirit and physical therapy for her recalcitrant limbs. And something new for Ms. Solid as a Rock: She allowed herself to be helped by others. Fellow teachers took turns bringing over dinners while SGI members chanted with Trude for hours during the day. For my part, I discovered that when push came to shove, I was able to stand on my own and be strong for her. With the help of this remarkable practice and a compassionate therapist, I turned what could have been a devastating occurrence into the fuel to make changes that had continued to elude me, including being able to face and overcome my childhood sadness and anger. Meanwhile, my love and admiration for Trude and my appreciation that I am able to chant each day continue to grow.

In her book, *Quiet Strength*, Rosa Parks gives some very simple advice: “I find that if I am thinking too much of my own problems and the fact that at times things are not just like I want them to be, I do not make any progress at all. But if I look around and see what I can do, and then I do it, I move on.” With this in mind, and a refreshed resolve to fully support my wife, I did my best to move ahead every day.

Trude: Medical researchers recently confirmed that Avonex, a beta interferon drug, has shown dramatic results for patients with relapse-remitting multiple sclerosis. Of course, I didn't know this when I made the difficult decision to begin Avonex more than four years ago. Perhaps to a fault, I had always avoided taking medication—I would simply chant colds and headaches away. Now, my neurologist was proposing I take a weekly injection that was not a cure, but a way to increase the time between relapses. My long list of questions could not be adequately answered and ultimately the decision was mine. In an effort to clarify matters, I went for a second opinion but this doctor said he was “on the fence.”

On the drive home, we called one of our seniors in faith. I expressed my concern that I should be able to overcome this illness solely through my practice. This leader reminded me that through daimoku I would gain the wisdom to understand what action to take. Deciding to take the medication would not mean my faith was weak. In the end, after many hours of chanting and my determination to make causes to improve my health, I decided to take the shots. Since that time I have seen a continued improvement in my health.

Mike: For the first few years, Trude could not walk any substantial distances. Then about two years ago, we decided to start walking regularly in preparation for a local MS Walk. This has made a real difference in Trude's health and stamina.

Trude: Now I am back in school working as a part-time reading teacher. My commitment to kosen-rufu is stronger than ever and, as the new leader of my district, I have taken on more responsibility than before I got sick. I have also found many other rewarding ways to challenge myself.

This April, Mike and I participated for the second time in the annual MS Walk in Reston, Va., walking six miles with 50 families, co-workers, clients, friends and some fellow SGI-USA members. Our team raised in excess of \$5,000 for MS research and was No. 14 out of more than 300 teams in the Washington, D.C., area. This was a great opportunity for us to take concrete action as Buddhists in our community. There were a lot of tears when I crossed the finish line.

It was a great warm-up for the month Mike and I just spent in the cooler climate of British Columbia. Thanks to the fortune I have received from my practice and the success of Mike's consulting business, I am able to avoid some of the hot and humid Virginia weather that is so punishing for people with MS. And, my appreciation for each moment of life continues to reveal itself through a new and unexpected creative pursuit: painting with watercolors.

It was up to me to transform this unexpected setback in my life into a source of personal growth and victory. Because of the support of my family, SGI members, friends and doctors, my life is much richer than ever before. This experience has deepened my compassion and understanding for others. As for the injections, my minor weekly stab of pain has become a major shot of hope.

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