

TOMMY LEE RAY, LOS ANGELES Anger Into Value

When I encountered Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, I was an angry, young black man seven years back from the Vietnam War. I felt that I was still at war — a war against what I considered to be the greatest evil to Black America: the American white man.

An incident in my hometown in Mississippi just days after my return from Vietnam plunged me for years into a nightmare of hatred and anger toward Caucasians. One day I got on a city bus and sat down beside a young Caucasian girl who promptly got angry and stood up because she didn't want to sit beside me. She and the bus driver began expressing their discontent with the seating on the bus. Although I had experienced things like this before Vietnam, this incident reached into the depths of my anger, particularly at that time in my life.

I moved to Tennessee in 1968 and got a job with the post office. For years I created disruption on and off the job, whenever and wherever I could. I came to work every day angry and dressed in as much traditional African dress as possible. I wore earrings and many beads around my neck. And I braided my hair. This adamant outward expression of my cultural consciousness was prompted by my desire to make America aware that discontent among my people still existed. It was also a protest against America having sent me off to Vietnam, bringing me back all shot up and then displaying such racial bias toward me.

I joined several revolutionary organizations, including the Black Panther Party. I concluded, because of the path I chose, I would probably die an early, violent death. But I was prepared to die for the Revolution — it was a necessary sacrifice. I continued on this death march for seven years after my return from Vietnam.

Until the day I was approached by a co-worker about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

I was insulted that this man, blacker than the color of my shoes, was asking me to consider some Eastern philosophy. I cursed him — didn't he think black people had enough trouble following white people's religion? Now he wanted to introduce me to Buddhism! He politely thanked me for the conversation and excused himself. I was taken aback at his pleasant response.

This co-worker continued to invite me to discussion meetings. I went, but I would deliberately sit in the rear and not do gongyo. When it ended, I would start to debate whatever subject was being discussed. Yet I was never asked to leave. I was again surprised at the generous response of members.

At one meeting, I was discussing the Black Revolution in America and the "back to Africa" movement when a member presented a report from the *World Tribune* on a Gohonzon-conferral ceremony for 50 members in Ghana. I was stunned. That was when I decided to give this Buddhism and the SGI a try.

That was 1975. My sponsor's gifts to me when I received the Gohonzon were a sutra book, a nice set of prayer beads and a copy of *The Human Revolution*, vol. 1. In the early years of my practice I did most of my studying of the Goshō from the guidance of presidents Toda and Ikeda contained in *The Human Revolution*. Over the years, this novelized history became my constant study guide.

The first time I tried gongyo on my own it took two hours. I called my sponsor and told him to come get the Gohonzon because I would not be spending two hours on my knees every morning. I took the altar down, but no one came to get it.

Around this time I was running for president of my national labor union. I was also cast in a Shakespearean play at a local university. Although my local union had the largest

membership and I was the favorite, I lost the election. I was also replaced in the play after rehearsing four to five hours nightly for three months. These incidents actually happened on the same day! I was plunged into a state of total depression.

At 2:00 in the morning, I called my district chief and told him my story. He asked me if I had chanted about the situation. I said no, because the Gohonzon was still sitting in the corner, the altar disassembled. He encouraged me to reenshrine the Gohonzon, chant daimoku and study this passage from the Gosho "On Prayer": "Though one might point at the earth and miss it, though one might bind up the sky, though the tides might cease to ebb and flow and the sun rise up from the west, it could never come about that the prayers of the practitioner of the Lotus Sutra would go unanswered" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 46).

At that moment I decided to dedicate my life to practicing with complete sincerity. I introduced many of my friends to Buddhism and became very happy practicing.

And as the years passed, I received many benefits. One of the greatest benefits was a change in my violent temper I had developed after my return from Vietnam.

There were also many obstacles. By 1984, the number of African Americans practicing in Tennessee greatly increased. Simultaneously, racial prejudice began surfacing in the organization.

That year, after 10 years as a district chief, my sponsor decided to give up his position because so much racial disunity had developed in our local SGI-USA. This deeply troubled me; this man had been so dedicated.

He shared with me some of the difficulties he had experienced over the years with the local leaders. One experience was particularly shocking. He said he had been told back in 1970 to slow down in introducing so many African Americans to the organization because it would prevent whites from joining. I saw him suffer great anguish and chant many, many hours of daimoku before he decided to give up his position. And I was appointed district chief in his place.

Problems continued until 1986, when racial disunity had developed to a breaking point — African Americans on one side and Japanese and Caucasians on the other. Most of the conflicts were among members in positions of leadership. I now felt betrayed by the SGI-USA.

By then, I had completely stripped myself of many of my old revolutionary ways of thinking and acting; I believed in my heart that this was the one organization in the world where this kind of conflict should not exist. So I started to voice my discontent to some of the leaders and was branded a troublemaker.

Many African American members became so disillusioned that a great number in my chapter discontinued their practice. Just about every men's division member, with the exception of myself and a couple others, quit or left the organization. The ranks of every other division were desimated as well. Many of these later joined the temple.

I was told that my district, which had been the first in the city, would become a group because of lack of participation. I would get so depressed from the guidance about this situation that there were mornings I did not want to get out of bed.

My sponsor told me that I should also consider giving up my district position because what I was doing to rebuild the district was not being appreciated by the SGI-USA leaders. But I knew I could not go that route.

I completely immersed myself in chanting hours and hours of daimoku and studying the Gosho and *The Human Revolution*. I went back to that very first Gosho I had studied, "On Prayer." The passage I chose this time was: "Now that the Former and Middle Days of the Law are over, persons who observe the precepts are as rare as tigers in a marketplace, and

Title: Anger into Value

Subject: World Tribune 01/31/97 n.3124 p.11 WT970131p11 Los Angeles, California

Author: Tommy Lee Ray

Keywords: Angeles Anger California Discrimination Diversity Experiences Prejudice Racism Value

men of wisdom are harder to find than the horns of a *ch'i-lin*. While waiting for the moon to rise, one must rely upon a torch, and when there are no true gems or treasures at hand, gold and silver must serve for treasures. The debt of gratitude one owes to the white crow may be repaid to the black crow, and the debt one owes to the holy priest may be repaid to the ordinary priest. So if you earnestly pray that blessings be given to you without delay, how can your prayers fail to be answered?" (MW-7, p. 47).

I returned to *The Human Revolution* to see what President Toda would have done in a situation like this. And there I found the perfect guidance: A passage described how President Toda had used dolls to conduct district meetings because of the lack of members when he began reconstructing the Gakkai.

I continued chanting many hours and having discussion meetings where I would set out stuffed animals and give each of them names. I invited my territory leader to one of my doll meetings; he was rather surprised when he came in and saw nothing but small stuffed animals at the meeting.

Eventually the members came back, one by one, to participate. The district was still a district. (It continues today as a healthy and vibrant center of world peace activities. In fact, several leaders, including the current headquarters chief, originally came from that district.)

I continued to study *The Human Revolution* and speak out about things I felt needed to change in our SGI-USA organization. Many times the only encouragement I got was from my daimoku and my connection to SGI President Ikeda through *The Human Revolution*. Even now, I become emotional when I read certain parts of this novel.

In 1987 I wrote President Ikeda a letter and included a poem that I had written for his birthday. I then made it a tradition to send him a poem each year on Jan. 2. These were based on my study of *The Human Revolution* over the years. In January 1992, I combined all of these poems into one poem, which I titled "Master and Disciple."

In January 1993 I came to Los Angeles to work and expand myself in the performing arts, planning to eventually return to Tennessee and continue to work for kosen-rufu there through the arts. That May, I spoke with General Director Emeritus George Williams, who encouraged me to achieve my goals and also to send "Master and Disciple" to President Ikeda. The next month, I received President Ikeda's thanks for this "heartfelt gift," as he put it.

So many, many things have changed since President Ikeda came in 1990 and gave the SGI-USA a facelift. I feel very fortunate that I never left the SGI-USA. Through those turbulent years, I have evolved to a state of life where my angry feelings and hatred for Caucasians, that were so deeply imbedded in the soul of my life, have been transformed into actions to create value for the sake of world peace.

I treasure my connection with Memphis. I have seen the organization there grow even beyond my expectations — there are leaders who have learned to listen and act on the concerns of the members and members who are getting opportunities in the organization that they seldom got before. In fact, I traveled to Memphis to perform in the relocation celebration of its community center, Jan. 25–26.

There are still lots of hard shells that must be broken within me. However, I am more than convinced that there is no other philosophy or organization that could have changed the death march that I was on. There is no other vehicle for me to achieve the greatest happiness, no other organization in which I can work as honestly for the sake of humanity. I will never leave Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and this great SGI-USA. I will continue striving for kosen-rufu as a disciple of President Ikeda until my last breath.

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