

TOM FISHER, LOS ANGELES
Now I Know —
Nothing Is Impossible

I grew up in Berkeley, Calif. (that college town with lots of hippies and radicals). It was like growing up in a town next to a great mountain where every day I would see climbers on their way to scale this mountain. This mountain was the University of California at Berkeley.

Throughout my childhood, I had a dream that someday I, too, might climb this mountain and attend UC Berkeley.

As years passed, however, this dream faded. By the time I started practicing Buddhism, I was 19 and had not yet even graduated from high school. I had dropped out (before being kicked out) at age 15 and went on to attend two other schools, both of which I was eventually kicked out of (mainly for lack of attendance).

I basically just hated school, had trouble getting good grades and skipped so many classes that I lost all desire to continue. The first high school eventually let me back in, but I dropped out again two years later. I just wasn't interested in school and didn't see any value in it.

During this time I became kind of a troublemaker. I bought and sold drugs and did many wild things. Berkeley was a crazy community at that time, and my association with wild people progressed.

At one point my parents' house was burglarized and some very nice jewelry of sentimental value was stolen. My mom was so upset that I determined to get it back. Because of my wild friends, I was able to find out who had stolen the jewelry. I had, in some sense, established trust with individuals in the community, and as a result the precious jewelry was returned to my family.

The Berkeley police learned of this incident and started keeping tabs on me. Soon after that, I was myself arrested for stealing and was assigned a probation officer, a local cop. My punishment was to ride with this officer periodically during his night beat to be an informer — and to listen to all his advice. The police were always trying different ways to influence us and to get information from us.

Despite their good influence, I got into more trouble. I spent short times in jail on probably 10 or 12 occasions. In fact, the last time I was there, Danny Nagashima (now SGI-USA vice general director) and Ed Feasel (now SGI-USA youth division chief) visited me. Mr. Nagashima told me, "Please enjoy every minute of this!" Danny then made me promise to never let it happen again.

Anyway, by age 19, my childhood dream to attend college was totally forgotten, not to mention completely unrealistic. However, as a direct result of chanting to the Gohonzon and because of the constant warm encouragement of many fellow SGI members, my desire for an education grew and I reawakened my childhood dream.

I deeply prayed to the Gohonzon to challenge my weakness in school and to become a capable person in society. After one year of junior college, I passed the units back to my high school and was given a diploma. After one more year of junior college, my dream was beginning to unfold — I was, miraculously, accepted by UC Berkeley into the physical education department (PE was the only major I was qualified to get into).

After one very difficult year, I was forced to drop out before being kicked out because of low grades. The course work was so demanding that I just could not imagine ever being able to handle it. I felt defeated after coming so far and then failing. It seemed like everyone there was just smarter than me. As time passed, however, I became deeply

encouraged by SGI President Ikeda's words, "Nothing is impossible when one sincerely chants to the Gohonzon."

I kept these words in mind and decided to follow my heart totally. I started taking computer science classes at UC Berkeley through extension (an option allowing outsiders to take courses without anything ever going on record — risk-free, so to speak). For some reason I started getting good grades, even though computer science was much more difficult than PE. I did this for two years while many counselors, as well as my parents, often tried to discourage me because none of the units or grades could ever be counted toward a degree.

The key turning point came when I determined to the Gohonzon to create lasting value out of this unofficial two-year education. Soon after that, I got a summer job with a professor in the computer science department. This was a great victory.

However, after six weeks, it became clear that I could never be paid because I was not an official student. I went home that night feeling defeated again since I had done all this work and had had such a great opportunity but could not even pay my rent (which was then overdue). I deeply prayed to the Gohonzon to turn poison into medicine and to somehow change the situation.

To my amazement, the very next day I discovered that my boss was also the chairman of the computer science admissions committee. In short, because he liked my work, this professor, despite many complications, got me accepted into UC Berkeley as an official computer science student. The only students ever to get into this program were straight-A students direct from high school (not even transfer students were allowed) — which was the opposite of my background.

Also, the previous two years of course work that I had done through extension were unexpectedly recognized toward the degree. In addition, I was able to keep my job with the professor, earning enough money to cover both tuition and rent until graduation time. The amount of work, however, became so intense that I almost gave up the entire thing. So many obstacles came up for every assignment and for every exam.

Then, during the finals week of my last semester, my only sister, Christine, was brutally murdered — raped and beaten to death. My family was devastated. Along with the loss of my sister, I saw all hope for any kind of a happy or secure future disappear from my parents' eyes. I deeply prayed to the Gohonzon and determined that I would do everything within my power to bring some kind of happiness and relief into my parents' lives.

As a result, I believe, of this determination, I was asked to speak at my graduation ceremony on the subjects of overcoming hardships and relating the study of computer science to everyday life. After the speech, I was unexpectedly awarded the 1990 computer science department Award of Recognition (for research activities during those two years). I couldn't help crying when I saw my parents' faces in the audience.

I became totally convinced of the power of the Gohonzon, and I had so much appreciation for many warm and understanding SGI-USA members. I became deeply determined to show proof of this practice in society toward the fulfillment of President Ikeda's great dream to establish a world without violence.

Three years later, I moved to Los Angeles to attend graduate school at the University of Southern California. I completed a master's degree in computer science last year. Currently, I am still at USC and now working toward a doctorate. As a result of chanting daimoku for the best possible job while in school, I am now working for a company that has agreed to pay for the rest of my education. The company was recently started by Disney, and I work with many warm and understanding people every day. I don't believe I could ask for a better situation.

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Just two weeks ago, because schoolwork has gotten so intense, I asked to work fewer hours at a reduced salary. My boss agreed to cut my hours by a third but kept my salary the same. As a result, I am determined now more than ever to show sincere appreciation at work.

I truly believe this practice of Buddhism can allow people to change the deepest aspects of their destiny. I will forever remember President Ikeda's words, "Nothing of value is ever accomplished easily."

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