

BILLY HENRY, DALLAS **Conquering Helplessness**

In May 1995, before I began my Buddhist practice, I had been diagnosed with cancer of the endometrium. The first six days after surgery were just fine. My neighbor Audrey McClure was working the night shift at the hospital then, and when she stopped by to visit, I told her I was recovering as well as could be expected and preparing to go home.

Then, I developed a massive infection. My incision was reopened, and doctors were scrubbing inside my abdomen with betadine and gauze sponges twice a day. I am a person who rarely takes anything for pain, but the pain from the infection and scrubbing was horrible. I was taking pain pills and morphine shots. The medicine made me hallucinate, but nothing stopped the pain.

Audrey and I were friendly but not close. I knew she practiced Buddhism but had not been particularly interested when she had explained about the practice and told me the words that she and her husband chanted together each day.

When she came to visit me again a week later, things had really changed.

I was in excruciating pain, and she could tell that I was really out of it. She asked if I knew who she was, and I did. For some reason, I clung to her as if I knew she would save my life, and she did. She promised me calmly that if I chanted Nam-myoho-rence-kyo for one-half hour, the pain would go away. She also said that if it didn't, she would never try to talk to me about Buddhism again. I had nothing to lose.

"Tell me the words again," I said.

I began to chant. I had 30 minutes until my next shot. I never needed it. When Audrey came to check on me in about 45 minutes, I was sleeping soundly.

For the rest of my hospital stay, the chanting continued to stop the pain. When I was released from the hospital after 17 days, I went to discuss this with Audrey.

As a life-long Seventh-Day Adventist, the idea of changing the way I had thought about the world for 55 years was almost as frightening as the cancer and the pain. I had to change, though. I had proof of this Buddhism.

I received the Gohonzon on Oct. 5, 1995.

From the beginning of my practice, I chanted a lot of daimoku because many of my health problems persisted. I had spells of feeling extremely overheated, a persistent pain in my abdomen, and I was extremely tired all the time. I still don't know how I managed to work, except that I chanted constantly. I was driving a taxi, and I chanted at the cab stands, at red lights, waiting for passengers — all day long.

In spite of all the tests and surgery I had undergone, the doctors didn't seem to know what was wrong with me. Finally, after much daimoku and several trips to the Endocrine Residents Clinic, I was diagnosed with diabetes and possible kidney damage. That was the pain in my abdomen that wouldn't go away.

I sat crying in front of the Gohonzon — the thought that I might have kidney damage was almost unbearable. I can face a lot of things, but I didn't think I could face kidney dialysis. For two days, I chanted every time there was no one in my cab.

After that two days of daimoku, the tests showed no signs of kidney damage. Through all of this, Audrey and many other SGI members in Dallas stood by me and chanted with me and did everything they possibly could to support me.

I learned everything I could about diabetes. I modified my diet, chanted a lot, and felt I was out of the woods.

Then, in April of 1996, a routine mammogram came back showing two small, suspicious

lumps. I was told I would need a needle biopsy. Here was the specter of cancer again, and besides that, I am terrified of needles. After the appointment, I made it to the Dallas Culture Center and fell into the arms of one of the leaders who happened to be there. She began to chant with me, and another member joined us. She didn't even know why we were chanting — just that I was crying and chanting and needed help.

The needle biopsy was a real ordeal. My first reaction was to faint. As I was coming around, the technician came in and said there was a woman named LaDrena McDowell at the door who said I needed her. Did I want her to come in?

You bet I did. LaDrena is a hospital employee and also an SGI member. Her computer system had crashed that day, so she was free to leave her office. She spent the rest of the day helping me to get through the procedure. She chanted with me, and there was no pain. The technician said, if it helped, to go ahead and chant. The doctor agreed and told me just to hold out until he said it was all right to faint. LaDrena and I kept chanting until he said they were through — then I fainted again.

How could I not believe that even though I had to endure all this bad health, I am protected when I chant. Of course, I did have cancer gain. I had to have a radical mastectomy. During the surgery, another lump, larger than the others, was discovered. It was under my arm, so it hadn't shown in any of the tests. I am very thankful it was caught before it spread. I did not have to take radiation or any of the horrifying treatments that I might have needed if it had continued to stay there and grow.

I did get another infection. This is common with diabetic patients. During the ensuing struggle, I had surprisingly little pain. I felt fine. I spent only three days in the hospital after surgery, feeling so good that I spent most of the time either in the meditation room chanting or in LaDrena's office, visiting.

I have been asked why I have faith to believe as I do when I still have all these health problems. I am not unhappy about my health. When you believe in indestructible happiness, you can get through anything. If I had not become a Buddhist, I would still have had the bad health problems, but I would have been helpless. Because of this practice, I don't feel helpless. I know I can win against all these problems by chanting and by taking the best care of myself. I also would not have had the support of the SGI members who have helped me, chanted with me, and comforted me.

I get a bit frustrated when I hear people say they can't work for kosen-rufu if they are ill. Your mission is important no matter what your circumstances. The people I have met in hospital waiting rooms are the people who need to hear about this practice the most. I have discussed Buddhism with my doctors and nurses even on the operating table.

I am a unit chief in my district, I work in the bookstore and as a volunteer receptionist at the culture center, I sing in the SGI Sunset Chorus, and I am a member of the publications bureau. I helped to design and paint the walls of the children's room at our center and do volunteer work in the community teaching English to Vietnamese adults as a tutor for the Literacy Council. I am determined not to let my health problems prevent me from doing activities.

It is wonderful when someone chants and is completely healed. But short of that, there are other kinds of actual proof that can deeply affect the lives of those around us. I have a dear friend (a Mormon, if it matters) who said if I had told her I was miraculously healed of cancer (which I wasn't), she would have thought I was full of baloney. However, she was there when the doctors were scrubbing my infected abdomen with betadine. Because I had been chanting, I could laugh and talk to her without pain. As far as she was concerned, that was a miracle.

As long as there is enough life in my body to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, there is enough life to tell others how to conquer helplessness and take charge of their problems.

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