

*To offer their children a life of opportunity, the Li family travels from India to America
— confronting many hardships along the way, and finally discovering that
Dreams Do Come True*

**By ALONZO DAVIS & ANDREW BRUCK
Jacksonville, Fla., Correspondents**

As a Chinese boy growing up in India, Tao Li dreamed of moving overseas to make a better life. Unable to become an Indian citizen, he had little hope of securing a government job, which meant — in a land of high unemployment and no minimum wage — struggling just to make ends meet.

His grandfather, who left China after World War I, was a shoemaker, one of the two traditional livelihoods for first-generation Chinese immigrants in India. Tao worked for his grandfather. When he married Chun Fang (“Vinnie”) Liu, Tao’s grandfather allowed part of his home to be converted into a hair salon to give Vinnie an occupation. All was well — except for the times when Tao talked with friends who had found jobs in other countries, and his dream to move overseas was rekindled.

After the birth of their second daughter, Vinnie also caught “overseas fever.” In China, her parents had worked on a farm but often lacked even rice to eat. So, just as Tao’s parents had, they moved to India, where they sustained themselves and sent money back to their struggling relatives. But life continued to be difficult.

Vinnie began to wonder, much as her parents had — how could she build a more promising future for her daughters? In India, even if Diane and Dorothy were to be better educated than her and Tao (neither stayed in school past the U.S. equivalent of 9th grade), they, too, would have few career choices. According to Dorothy, many youth in India seek to marry foreigners so they can move away from a dead-end situation.

In 1989, after securing a U.S. tourist visa, Tao traveled alone to Florida, moved in with a distant relative and began to lay the foundation for his family to join him.

He worked as a dishwasher in Jacksonville, but after a while, the owner could no longer pay him. Vinnie feared that if Tao returned to India, their dream would be lost forever. She encouraged him to keep trying. It was a stressful time: They knew what they wanted but not how it would be achieved.

Tao found work at a Chinese restaurant. A co-worker there named Yoshi Kushibiki introduced him to Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. Although it interested him, he didn’t fully embrace chanting.

In 1990, Vinnie left her daughters in the care of Tao’s brother and joined Tao in Florida. Yoshi introduced her to Buddhism as well. The practice seemed natural to her. She remembered her mother, who practiced a different sect of Buddhism, always carrying a prayer book with her despite not knowing how to read it.

Vinnie and Tao received the Gohonzon and chanted quietly in their relative’s house. After a short time, they rented an apartment, which they considered their first benefit.

But chanting and their pursuit of financial fortune were not the magic formula for a quick reunion with their daughters. They strengthened their determination to persevere.

With a business partner, they invested in a Chinese restaurant. As co-owner of the restaurant and with Vinnie’s support, Tao endured long hours and an increasingly uncooperative business partner. The situation became so bad that the partner withheld Tao’s salary.

For the sake of their daughters, they knew they couldn’t give up. They dreamt of one day having their own business.

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In 1993, they began seeking permanent U.S. citizenship, which required a trip to India. Indian officials promised an emigration interview within six months. The months passed, however, and they were told that it would take three additional months. Tao and Vinnie chanted with a renewed determination to fulfill their dreams. In less than two weeks, permission for an interview was granted.

All this time — three years — they had never discussed their dream or their problems with fellow SGI members. Until now. With so much at stake, they decided to tell their SGI-USA friends before leaving for India.

After their interview in Calcutta, they seemed to be in line for U.S. citizenship. But during what they thought was their final emigration meeting in Bombay, the consulate discovered a procedural problem and withheld approval. Their long-sought dream, almost within reach, now slumped in the shadow of the consulate's notoriously stubborn and rigid reputation. To make matters worse, their possessions and their business were back in the United States.

Turning again to their faith, they attended a meeting of SGI-Bharat members at the New Delhi Community Center. Vinnie introduced her brother and sister to the practice, and all three chanted together.

One member's experience in particular greatly encouraged them: While chanting to afford a trip to Japan, the woman realized that she had always encouraged fellow Buddhists to focus their prayers on specific problems — but she hadn't followed her own guidance. So she focused her prayer on solving her problem and, unexpectedly, a friend repaid a forgotten loan. The woman was able to travel to Japan.

When they heard this story, Vinnie and Tao made up their minds to succeed.

They called Jacksonville member Namita Sarkar to update her and ask for the prayers of the members. Namita didn't admit to them her worries. Her own niece had been denied consulate permission to pursue a doctorate in economics despite her previous overseas pre-doctoral studies. Namita managed to say: "Chant hard. I don't know what will happen in these circumstances. Something will come up."

Jacksonville member John Copeland wrote to reassure them that members were chanting for them. Namita called again to say: "Don't worry. You'll see."

Another source of encouragement to them at this crucial moment was a Goshō passage:

Never let life's hardships disturb you. After all, no one can avoid problems, not even saints or sages. Just continue chanting Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō. Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life and continue chanting Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō, no matter what happens. Then you will experience the boundless joy from the Law. Strengthen your faith more than ever. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 161)

Typically, once a visa is granted, it takes three to 12 months before it's issued. Tao and Vinnie chanted passionately. Ten days later, to their amazement, they received four visas and were soon back in the United States. With this saga at last behind them, Tao and Vinnie happily gave their daughters American names.

Business, however, did not go so smoothly. While Tao had been away, his business partner had not paid all the bills. To earn desperately needed funds, Tao took a job at a local Japanese restaurant, learning a new style of cooking.

Yoshi Kushibiki's husband, whom they barely knew, had already been scoping out a good site for Tao and Vinnie to start their own restaurant. On Christmas Eve, the two couples drove around looking at possible locations. After finding nothing inviting in Jacksonville, they followed Tao's intuition to go "a little bit farther."

They stopped at a strip mall to get sandwiches. Next door to the sandwich shop was an

empty restaurant site with a “For Lease” sign in the window. As it turns out, the site was perfectly equipped for the style of cooking that Tao had learned. Also, there were few other fast-food restaurants nearby. Before long, Tao and Vinnie were in business.

Lee’s Garden restaurant has thrived since the day it opened. Last August, when one of Tao’s brothers moved to the United States, they opened a second restaurant, Chung-wa, in nearby Green Cove Springs.

Also, their desire for better opportunities for their daughters has clearly blossomed through prayer and effort. This was accentuated when both daughters were invited to participate in a relatively new academic program: Provided they maintain good grades through high school, they are eligible for special college scholarships and assistance in identifying their career interests. Dorothy is considering a career in marine biology. Both girls are active in their Buddhist practice. They sing in the local SGI-USA chorus and enjoy taking music lessons.

Tao and Vinnie are a long way from a vague dream of a better life. With faith and perseverance, dreams can and do come true.

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