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**What a Difference!**

In the fall of 1994, at age 25, I had undergone emergency surgery to remove my appendix. My career as a flight attendant and my favorite pastimes of weight-training and body-building had always kept my days busy. I could hardly accept the instructions from my doctor that I could not fly or workout for six weeks.

But instead of pouting about what could have been six weeks of utter boredom, I decided to use the time wisely and satisfy a desire I'd had for quite a while: I had been craving something spiritual in my life.

After growing up gay under the teachings of the Catholic Church, never feeling accepted, I was determined to find a religion where I could be myself, be accepted without stipulations and — for a change — feel spiritually complete.

After many hours at the library investigating different religions and their practices, I found myself going in circles, not sure which end was up. Out of frustration, I turned my back on the section where the books on religion were and headed for something more fun: the section on music, particularly my favorite — rock and roll.

And there she was! The woman who would be forever known to me as the first person to lead me to this Buddhism — Tina Turner. I read her autobiography, *I, Tina*, and subsequently saw the movie on her life. That was it! In this woman's story, I saw a religion that really worked.

I went on to investigate Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, though I had not yet heard of the SGI. My interest led me to the Nichiren Shoshu temple in Queens. I found an altar store there and began talking to the temple members in the store. I told them that I wanted to practice this Buddhism. The first instruction I received was: "Do not receive a counterfeit Gohonzon."

Mind you, I did not even know what the Gohonzon was, nor was it explained to me. Regardless, I bought an altar and accessories. There were no books available there to me on this Buddhism. The temple members gave me only a small pamphlet.

Before I left, I was asked to leave a donation to the temple so that the priest would know I was "sincere." Sincere?! I had taken a bus, a subway and a taxicab to get from my home in New Jersey to where the temple was in Queens! I did not leave a donation.

I walked away feeling uncomfortable about the whole thing. When I got home, I wrapped up the altar and packed it away in a closet, knowing in the back of my mind, however, that one day it would come out again.

In February 1997, almost two-and-a-half years later, there she was again! Tina Turner talking about this Buddhism in a TV interview with Larry King. This time she mentioned a man called President Ikeda. She stirred my interest again — so, this time I set out to find out who this President Ikeda was.

Back again at the library, the only entry in the computer under Daisaku Ikeda was "Soka Gakkai." From there, I picked up a New York City telephone directory and found the phone number and address of the SGI-USA New York Culture Center. I could feel that I was onto something big.

I called the culture center and spoke to Ethan Gelbaum. It felt right! I hopped on the bus to Manhattan and headed for the culture center, where I met David Kasahara, a vice general director, who hugged and congratulated me when I told him I knew about Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and wanted to practice this Buddhism. He showed me the bookstore, and Ethan connected me to an SGI-USA group in Princeton, N.J.

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What a difference between the warm welcome I received at the SGI and my initial experience with the temple! I left the culture center that rainy afternoon with a bag full of books, beads, candles and incense, and with my head feeling 10 times bigger than when I had arrived. I began chanting that night, unpacking that altar and finally receiving the Gohonzon last Sept. 21.

Shortly before receiving the Gohonzon, I received in the mail a final warning from the temple not to join the SGI. I needed to practice to a Nikken-transcribed Gohonzon, it said, in order to practice correctly.

It went on to say, "Your faith alone is not enough." Perfect timing, as I had just read the Gosho "The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra," where the Daishonin writes, "Faith alone is what really matters" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 246).

In the literature I received from the temple, the priesthood clearly contradicted the Gosho. How could this not be obvious to the temple members?

My good fortune and benefit have been immense. Last fall, I found a beautiful new home and brought my life-condition up to a place where it can benefit others. I became an adult volunteer for a support group for gay and lesbian teenagers called Gay and Lesbian Youth in New Jersey. Besides working with the teens on weekends, I speak at high school diversity days throughout New Jersey about the group and about growing up gay.

I give many thanks to President Ikeda and the SGI-USA members in Princeton, who took me under their collective wing when I began practicing. And to the diva, Ms. Tina, for unknowingly inspiring me to practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

My life is proof that faith and a seeking mind can take you anywhere you want to be.

**WT**