

**KARINA McMILLAN, SAN FRANCISCO**  
**Translating Failure Into Benefit**

**Karina McMillan was accepted into the master's program at a prestigious school for translation and interpretation. Little did she know that she'd have to go through a nightmare of self-doubt to achieve her dream.**

When SGI President Ikeda came to the United States in 1990, I was so impressed by his interpreter that, even though it didn't seem at all feasible at the time, I began to dream of becoming an interpreter.

I spoke Spanish, but I couldn't imagine ever mastering such a difficult skill as interpretation. Four years later, full of hope and excitement, I was on my way to Monterey, Calif., to get a master's in translation and interpretation at the world-renowned Monterey Institute of International Studies.

My high hopes came crashing down, however, when the head of the department informed us that fewer than half the students who begin the program actually finish. I heard a little voice in my head say, "I'll never make it." And from that moment on, I was constantly plagued with the fear of failing.

When classes started, I felt like I was in a military boot camp. In interpretation class, the professor ridiculed us, made sarcastic remarks, laughed at our mistakes and even told some students that they were stupid. The atmosphere was extremely competitive.

To my despair, no matter how hard I tried, I could not interpret. It seemed that my worst fears were coming true. I began to hate myself and wonder what was wrong with me.

Far away from the members with whom I usually chanted and with practically no time to do activities, I began to slip back into the same depression I suffered before I practiced Buddhism. I felt so lonely and isolated! Sometimes I was tempted to skip my usual hour-a-day of chanting because of the huge workload, but I tried my best to keep it up; I knew it was the only thing that kept me going.

I read certain statements by President Ikeda so often that I memorized them, such as: "Worrying about other people's capricious evaluations of you is a pettiness that has nothing to do with Buddhism." Also, I often heard President Ikeda say that instead of comparing ourselves to others we should compare ourselves to the way we were at the beginning of our practice. Even so, I was obsessively worried about making a fool of myself in class and constantly compared myself to other students.

As the year progressed, the number of students in the program dwindled. I was hanging on by the skin of my teeth, expecting to be approached by my professors at any moment with the typical "Maybe you should consider another profession."

By the second semester, I was at the bottom of my class. I began to feel there was no hope for me. When it came time to form groups with other students to practice interpreting, everyone avoided me, because I was so slow, and I ended up with fewer practice groups than I was supposed to have.

But the worst part was interpretation class. I was terrified of my professor. I couldn't sleep at all the night before class, and I would go to class shaking so hard I couldn't even listen to the speech I was supposed to interpret. My professor seemed to enjoy tearing me to pieces. It was the worst humiliation I ever experienced.

Finally, the moment we had all been dreading arrived: the qualifying exams, which each student must pass to go on to the second year. You're given only two chances. Those who don't pass are forced to drop out of the program.

A few weeks before the exams, my interpretation professor called me into her office and told me to make other plans for the following year. She didn't think I was going to pass. I was devastated, but I knew she was right.

If it weren't for my Buddhist practice, I would have given up right then and there. Common sense told me I didn't have a chance. But I always heard that anything is possible with this Buddhism, so I started chanting six hours a day.

In spite of all my chanting, I only passed three out of seven exams — not even half! I was furious! I had put all my faith in the Gohonzon and chanted so many hours. What had gone wrong?

However, President Ikeda has said many times that those who persevere achieve much more than those who were born talented. I knew I still couldn't give up. Soon afterward, I found out that some changes had been made in the testing system. I had to retake only two exams instead of four. I thought, "Maybe the Gohonzon hasn't abandoned me after all."

After studying all summer in Chile, I returned home and started chanting my six hours a day again in preparation for my second and final chance at the exams. But you can't chant that much without gaining some wisdom....

The day before I was to take my exams, I suddenly realized I wasn't ready. I then recalled some unsolicited advice that I was given by another student at Monterey. She had suggested that I take a leave of absence for a year to take some classes in economics and political science before attempting the exams. I hadn't paid any attention to her, because I didn't like her — besides, I was too old to be spending another year in school and had no money to pay for another year. But suddenly, I thought, "You know, instead of hating her for being so talented, maybe I should try to learn something from her."

I made a split-second decision and called the school to let them know I'd be back in a year.

I spent the year studying full time at a community college. It was a huge struggle financially, but somehow I managed to survive. Before I knew it, the year was over and the time had come to retake my exams. But I didn't feel any closer to passing than I had a year before. My interpreting was still a disaster. I almost hoped I wouldn't pass, so I would be spared another year of torture.

I went to speak to a women's division leader who told me how fortunate I was to be getting this type of experience, and that I should really appreciate my professor. She told me that it's not easy to be an interpreter, and that I would have to be really good and also very tough to make it in such a difficult field. She said that my attitude should be: "Gohonzon, this is not hard enough. Give me more! I want the best training so I can become a great interpreter." That was just what I needed to hear.

I started chanting to pass the exams not so that I could become an interpreter but to get training for my life that would make me so strong that nothing could ever make me suffer again. I began to realize how immature and self-centered I had been. At 38, not only was I one of the oldest students in the program, I was also a Buddhist. Yet I had completely forgotten the spirit of this Buddhism. I decided my mission for my second year in school was to encourage the other students through what I knew would be a difficult time for all of us.

Well, I passed my exams and was told that I did an excellent job. When I saw my interpretation professor a few days later, I could tell she still considered me a lost cause, but on the first day of class, I realized that something had really changed. I still felt nervous, but my fear no longer dominated me. To my astonishment, one day, after I did my interpretation, my professor looked at me with a surprised look on her face and said, "Good."

After that, she became my strongest supporter. She even used me as an example in class

and at the end of the semester gave me an A-minus. Talk about the impossible becoming possible!

The most challenging part of the second year was interpreting in front of hundreds of people. Sometimes I was so scared, I thought I would faint. I had to continually remind myself, "This is my training!" And it always gave me the courage to get through it.

When I saw how difficult the second year was, I realized what a benefit it was that I had failed some of my exams the first year. If I had somehow managed to pass them all, I would have never made it through the second year, because I wasn't ready then.

And by the end of the second year, I was one of only four students left in the interpretation program. We were all close, and I could see that I had achieved what I had been chanting for. I really had become like an older sister to them, and they often came to me for encouragement.

However, the biggest obstacle of all was yet to come — the dreaded professional exams we had to pass to get our degree. I felt light years away from passing them. But I chanted to do my best, and to my surprise, I passed seven out of 10 on the first try and two more a few months later. I have one more to go, which I will be taking soon.

After the exams, one of my professors asked me to talk to another student who had failed miserably. She wanted me to tell her what I had done that had enabled me to improve so much. The only advice I could offer her was to not give up.

I am now working as an interpreter, and I love my job. Every time I think about it, it feels like a dream. I would like to close by telling everyone who has an unfulfilled dream that no matter how impossible it may seem, as long as you persevere and chant, you can definitely achieve it.

**WT**