

**PETER NATHEN BANNE, PACIFICA, CALIF.
Riding the Crest**

Peter Banne is living his dreams, thanks to 23 years of wholehearted Buddhist practice. He rides the big waves, plays in a rhythm and blues band and enjoys a successful career. But most impressive to him: Both his parents are chanting, too.

The struggle to build my life out of what appeared to be a tangle of frustrated dreams and fantasies began more than 20 years ago with a determination to chant two hours a day for a job. I was 26 and had settled in a small city — 1,000 miles from home — after having been introduced to Buddhism by a complete stranger.

Trying this practice in a new environment proved to be much more than I had bargained for.

I remember riding my bicycle one evening up a steep hill in the freezing rain after working a 12-hour shift unloading fishing boats. Cold, tired, broke, smelling of dead fish, thinking that life couldn't get much tougher. I was wrong!

I proceeded to get myself hired and fired from a string of jobs over a period of 18 months, until finally I landed a position with an insurance company as a sales representative — an act of sheer desperation, or so it seemed at the time. Two years later, while trying to establish myself as a life-insurance professional, I decided to take the next step in becoming respectable: getting married. Five years later, after seeing my marriage crumble into ruins, along with what little financial fortune I had accumulated, I decided to try it again.

My “rebound marriage” didn't last long. It seemed that I was determined to experience all human sufferings in one lifetime.

But this Buddhist organization got me back on track whenever I became lost. Many of my leaders became my trusted friends. I received countless hours of compassionate guidance. I put my heart and soul into activities — from holding discussion meetings in my home to playing drums in the Brass Band. (Little did I know what the future effect would be.)

At the age of 48, I am now a certified financial planner, still with the same insurance company I started with 22 years ago. I have a well-established clientele, a six-figure income and the freedom to work where and when I desire.

Best of all, I can help people — listening to them, hearing their hopes and dreams, trying to solve problems. The work is always challenging, and occasionally clients will tell me that I have made a difference in their lives.

My career was the first experience I had in trusting the Gohonzon rather than merely using my head to make a decision. The wisdom to take this job and try my best, even though my mind had told me otherwise, came from listening to other members share their experiences about Buddhist practice and listening to lots of guidance.

The organization gave me the training I needed to turn what seemed at first a ridiculous job into a great career: the encouragement to keep trying when I felt too tired or discouraged to go on. Even when my relationships, finances and unsuccessful business dealings seemed overwhelming, I could raise my life-condition by thinking about other people's happiness and kosen-rufu.

And so my career was launched by the time I was 35. But I always knew there was more to me than being a financial planner.

As a teenager, I had dreams of being a big-wave rider, and by the time I was nearly 40 years old, my surfing fantasies became reality — after overcoming numerous physical limitations. I had injured my back several times, and I was so nearsighted that I couldn't even read the large E on the eye chart. I hadn't exercised much from ages 20 to 35, and I had no self-confidence when it came to sports. Aside from the obvious physical training that was required, there were numerous financial obstacles, too. Worst of all was the seemingly endless ridicule and scorn from other more competent surfers out there in the water, sometimes in life-threatening situations.

I quickly found that riding big waves with contact lenses simply didn't work. When I happened to see an ad for radial keratotomy surgery while riding the bus one day, I decided to find out more about it. In those days (1986), radial keratotomy was still an experimental procedure. I got to know the physician who pioneered this procedure in the United States, and he was very supportive of my Buddhist practice.

About a year and four surgeries later, my vision was 20/20 and somehow has even improved since then — a rather unusual outcome. My doctor tells me my vision now is 20/15.

After each surgical procedure, there were weeks of intense chanting for my eyes to heal. At last, the morning after my fourth surgery arrived. Immediately upon arising, I knelt before my altar, lifted the patch from my right eye, and the very first sight that greeted my eyes was the Gohonzon, shining crystal clear in the morning light. I nearly cried with gratitude.

I have been catching and riding big waves ever since, from the Fiji Islands to Mexico. On all my surfing trips, I always take the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, copies of the *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism*, and I chant a lot every day. I have fond memories of chanting at the beautiful community centers on the Hawaiian Islands, sharing experiences with the Hawaiian members, and always introducing Buddhism to people whenever the opportunity arises, wherever I go.

My other childhood fantasy was to be a drummer in a rock-and-roll band. Although I played many musical instruments in my life, I never felt truly “one” with any of them.

At the age of 46, I bought my first drum set and started jamming with a couple of talented musician friends. Two years later, we have a respectable rhythm-and-blues band, able to play an entire evening of dance music at a club or a party, and we write much of our music ourselves.

Thanks to Buddhism, I was not discouraged after my first half-hearted attempts at playing drums: I would jump on somebody else's drum set at a party or practice on a beat-up-thrown-together drum set that I shared with another musician friend, who let me practice in his warehouse bedroom while he was out playing gigs.

I mostly learned to play on the job, with little training or even time to practice. What great fortune to play with excellent musicians who can give me helpful criticism when I need it and generous praise when I deserve it! I chant that I can accept the criticism, and pray before each performance for the music to lift people's spirits.

Of all the benefits I have received, perhaps the greatest is to be able to chant with my parents. When I first introduced my parents to Buddhism nearly 20 years ago in Los Angeles, I never actually expected that they would practice. After I connected my mom with some local members, though, she began chanting almost immediately. She recently told me that she has kept track of her daimoku and is now working on her 37th million.

My dad didn't practice until he had a stroke at the age of 85. They now chant 10 minutes together every afternoon.

Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo together with both my parents is a powerful experience

Title: Riding the Crest

Subject: World Tribune 06/05/98 n.3194 p.1 WT980605p01 Pacifica, California

Author: Peter Banne

Keywords: California Career Crest Experiences News Pacifica Riding

that words cannot adequately describe. I am confident their happiness is assured in this lifetime and beyond, and their life force is remarkable. My dad, now 88, while unable to do much these days, is happy and content, while my mother, a world traveler at age 78, still teaches a stretch class for senior citizens and regularly attends SGI-USA meetings. She just recently had her very first book published — a work of fiction based on her life experiences.

SGI President Ikeda encourages us to read the writings of Nichiren Daishonin every day. For this reason, I always comb the *World Tribune* for quotes from the Daishonin's writings. I try to absorb each word, just as in reciting the sutra.

There is one passage from the Daishonin's writings that has always spoken directly to me about the power of faith in Buddhism. To me, this passage has been at times an anchor and at other times a lighthouse: "Although I and my disciples may encounter various difficulties, if we do not harbor doubts in our hearts, we will as a matter of course attain Buddhahood. Do not have doubts simply because Heaven does not lend you protection. Do not be discouraged because you do not enjoy an easy and secure existence in this life. This is what I have taught my disciples morning and evening, and yet they begin to harbor doubts and abandon their faith.

"Foolish men are likely to forget the promises they have made when the crucial moment comes" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 180).

I used to say that I would write an experience for the *World Tribune* when I was happily married.... I decided not to wait, because I realized just how remarkable my life has become and how much of my happiness I owe to the practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism, the guidance of President Ikeda and the support of the SGI.

In the coming chapter of my life, I want to be able to say that I have helped many people to discover the power of Buddhist practice and the joy of belonging to this organization.

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