

**CONQUERING SELF-DOUBT
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The following is excerpted from a presentation given at the SGI-USA Culture Department Conference, which was held Nov. 13–15, 1998, at the Florida Nature and Culture Center.

When I've had the opportunity to speak with many SGI artists, I've noticed that a subject that comes up a lot is concern about self-doubt. Many of us in the arts are confident and optimistic, but all of us have to deal with self-esteem questions at one time or another. I, like many artists, have had to struggle with self-doubt in my own life.

Even before I entered the first grade, I already knew that I wanted to become an artist. I was interested in all forms of art: visual arts, the theater and, of course, Spanish dance, which is now my career. I was lucky that my first-grade teacher saw that I had an artistic nature. She was the first person to nurture, support and encourage my interests in the arts at an early age.

My parents did not take my interest in the arts seriously until much later when I decided to do this for a living. In fact, they tried very hard to discourage my creativity. My response was to shut down — and I flunked the fifth grade. After that, they realized that I was serious about pursuing my artistic interests, so they consented to let me go to dance school and acting classes. Still, they thought the whole idea was silly. This is what I heard: "You'll never amount to anything." "Going into the arts is dumb. You're dumb." "Give it up, be practical." "You will suffer and starve in the arts." "You're not good enough."

Then my classmates found out that I was going to dancing school and theater classes instead of playing football, basketball or baseball. I was derided by them, too: "Only girls go to dance classes." "You're a sissy." "Don't come near me."

Ideas like that became ingrained in my life at a very early age, so they had a lot to do with how I thought of myself. These discouraging forces — many years of negative thinking about myself and being brought up in an environment of negativity — were the foundation of my becoming a skillful self-slanderer.

I met José Greco, the famous Spanish dancer, many times when he performed near my family home in Cleveland, Ohio. Eventually he took an interest in me and advised my parents to send me to Spain for training. If I made it through that, he would allow me to audition for his company. My dream of working for him kept me going through four years of studies in Spanish dance in Spain.

When I returned from Spain, I went to my audition with the José Greco Spanish Ballet only to be told, even before he saw me dance, that I had grown too tall for his company.

I was devastated, but I was used to accepting rejection. After all, I was never going to amount to anything. "I was stupid. They were right; this is not practical. Anyway, I haven't suffered enough — I haven't starved yet. Of course I was rejected!" I was perfecting the art of self-slander along with a career full of rejections. (Later I did get into the José Greco Company and became his lead dancer. It was while I was in his company that I was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.)

When I was 18 years old, I went to New York to seek my fortune in the arts. I needed an agent. I had heard about the famous William Morris Agency, so I looked them up. The receptionist must have taken a liking to me and my raw enthusiasm because I got an inter-

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Subject: World Tribune 01/08/99 n.3224 p.6 WT990108p06

Author: Pascual Olivera

Keywords: Artists Arts Career Conquering Dancer Experiences Olivera Pascual People Self-Doubt

view with an agent. He really liked me and wanted to sign me to a seven-year exclusive contract. It so happened that the William Morris Agency was the casting office for the musical *The Sound of Music*, starring Mary Martin. The agent wanted to place me in the musical so I could make enough money to live in New York and continue my studies in acting, singing and dancing. He was going to help direct my career. I left the William Morris office on cloud nine. My feet hardly touched the ground.

Then I started to think.... “But I’m not ready for this, it’s too fast. Where is the suffering, the starving for my art? What if they find out I’m not really good enough? I’m stupid. I will not amount to anything anyway.” Overwhelmed with self-doubt, I never went back to the William Morris Agency and never returned their calls.

I had many opportunities like this in my career and I always managed to sabotage them. I finally ended up in a traveling musical revue that performed in supper clubs. The owners were alcoholics and very abusive. I felt right at home and stayed for almost two years.

In 1968, I started to practice Buddhism. I learned immediately that you should never slander the Gohonzon, the members, the leaders or the practice, or you will see the bad effects in your life and will be miserable. For some reason, I got that down real fast and since I desperately wanted to succeed in my life, I did my best to abide by those basic ideas. At the time, however, there was not much talk of self-slander. I practiced very hard and made my dreams come true in spite of what I was thinking about myself: “I’m not a very good member.” “Wait until they find out that I am not a very good person.” “I’m a terrible leader. It’s only a matter of time until they discover that I’m stupid.”

In spite of my negative thinking, I still made my Buddhist practice work for me in many ways (that’s how powerful Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is), but, fundamentally, I was not happy. I was not free.

In 25 years as a Buddhist, I had overcome many obstacles and had many turning points. All my dreams had come true — I had the career of my dreams, the marriage of my dreams against all odds, the home of my dreams, I had overcome an incurable illness, I had even become a successful leader — all in spite of myself, but I was still imprisoned by my negative thinking.

Then I had another turning point, which came in the form of an obstacle so gigantic that this time I thought even my practice to the Gohonzon could not save me.

I contemplated suicide. I considered not chanting anymore. (I never understood how people could stop practicing, but now, at this impasse in my life, I had the very same thoughts.) Fortunately, I was — and still am — diligent about observing gongyo, so even during this horrific time, I never stopped doing gongyo. Sometimes I felt like I was chanting in a coma. I was numb, but I did not stop.

Then I read something from SGI President Ikeda: “Each of us has ‘one fundamental evil’ — one basic fault — that stands in the way of our personal growth. If we can overcome our fundamental fault, everything will open up dramatically” (Sept. 12, 1997, *World Tribune*, p. 13).

I decided to try again and, this time, I would challenge myself to find my fundamental evil.

“When your determination changes,” President Ikeda says, “everything else begins to move in the direction you desire. The moment you resolve to be victorious, every nerve and fiber in your being immediately orient themselves toward your success. On the other hand, if you think, ‘This is never going to work out,’ at that instant, every cell in your being will be defeated, giving up the fight. Everything then will move in the direction of

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failure” (July 11, 1997, *World Tribune*, p. 14).

After chanting much daimoku, I realized that my one fundamental evil and the destructive roots of my life were self-slander and self-doubt. I was determined to conquer my negative thinking about myself. For three weeks I did not let one negative thought enter my mind. Then something negative happened and I attacked myself with a vengeance. After two days of beating up on myself, I felt I was in my element. I had my true identity back. I had found my way back to my comfort zone and the struggle was over, or so I thought.

It was at that moment that I realized that if self-doubt was at the core of my life and this was where I could find comfort, then I was in deep trouble. That obstacle and that realization were the turning point for me and I made a big step in my lifelong quest for inner human revolution.

I started the process with the most difficult task: learning to like myself. I could never say to myself, “I like you, I love you.” That seemed awkward for me, so I pictured myself as a little boy hiding in the corner — crying and bruised and filled with pain. I had to picture myself embracing this little child (myself) and saying things to him like: “I will never hurt you again (by slandering you). I will never abuse you again or let anyone else abuse you again. I will make you the happiest person in the world. I will never let you cry or make you sad.” I did this once a week for two hours at a time. Each time I had negative thoughts about myself, the image of this little boy would appear and I would not break my promise to this now happy child.

When people tried to abuse me, I would not allow it. I also kept a journal during this time and wrote out all my most negative and secret feelings about myself and others. For a year I wrote three pages a day, no matter what. I wrote until I had no more negativity to write. I had worked through it, let it go, and now my inner child was happy and at peace. I had cleansed myself by purging my negativity in writing — and by chanting.

Sometimes I would watch myself in different negative situations just to see how I would react, but nothing could bring out self-slander anymore because it was gone. I was healed.

I don’t want to give the impression that I’m perfect. Inner revolution is an ongoing thing. I can still be negative and complain with the best of them. The difference now is that I always go back to the Gohonzon and change my problems. I don’t let bad things linger anymore.

Not long ago, I was greatly disappointed with some changes that took place in the organization. I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. I moaned and groaned for a short time. Then I dragged myself to the Gohonzon and chanted and chanted through my pain, discovering that I had a lesson to learn, that this was no coincidence. This was my opportunity to grow and develop my faith. My prayer was heartfelt and a few weeks later the circumstances changed and became the best situation I’ve ever had. I had been suffering for 15 years with this issue and it all came down to changing my own attitude.

Today I can sincerely say I have a life of true freedom and happiness. I have no regrets in my life about anything. I only want to help the many artists who are still trapped in their own self-doubt and who have made this their comfort zone without realizing it.

Everyone has a different experience of how they became self-doubters. In a creative life, it’s easy to do. As artists we live in a world of rejection. “You’re too tall.” “You’re not tall enough.” “You’re too good-looking.” “You’re not good-looking enough.” “You’re too young.” “You’re too old.” “Your work is too modern — too abstract. We can’t sell that stuff here.” “Your work is too realistic — not modern or abstract enough. Go somewhere

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else.” “Who ever told you you could write?” “Don’t give up your day job.” “Just put it on the pile marked Z and don’t call me.” “What symphonies have you played with?” “Sorry, you’re over qualified.” “Sorry, you’re not qualified enough.” “Sorry, you’re just not good enough.” “Sorry, you’re just too good for us.” “YOU GOT THE JOB!!” “Why me? I’m not good enough. I’m not ready. I haven’t suffered enough. I have to wait tables just a little longer. They deserve the job more. They are much more talented than I will ever be!”

I was once asked this question at an Arts Division meeting: “I have two actresses in my artist group at home. They are both the same age, the same type and go out for the same parts. One is much more talented than the other, but the less talented one always gets the jobs. The more talented one has not had an acting job in a year and waits tables for a living. How can that be?”

My guess would be that the one who is always working in her profession has this thought process: “I got up late. I just started my period. I feel terrible, but I will put this aside and go forward and win. I am the best person for this part. This part was made for me. I should have this part and I will prove that in my audition. I am grateful to be able to play this role. I will sign a contract and this film will be a success because of my talent and contribution. This is my lucky year and my lucky day. I’m not in great shape, but they will love me anyway.”

The other actress thinks: “I got up late, why bother even going now? I just started my period and I feel terrible. I may just stay in bed. I probably won’t get the part anyway. There will be a lot of talented actresses auditioning and I don’t have the talent to measure up. I can’t handle being rejected. I have not had a part in over a year. What if I get the part? I have not worked in over a year. I’m out of shape. I hope I don’t have to wait another year. This is just not my year. This is not my lucky day!”

Who do you think will get the part?

As artists, we must overcome the fear of failure — and the fear of success. We must develop the courage to remember that there is no such thing as failure in Buddhism, only turning points. With the sword of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can battle our greatest fears, our most negative thoughts, and we can replenish our lives with hope and optimism.

President Ikeda says, “In other words, don’t make excuses. Take responsibility for your life — resolve to be victorious. If you allow yourself to be defeated, all the excuses in the world will get you nowhere. Defeat is defeat no matter how eloquently you try to justify yourself. The important thing is to win where you are right now, to achieve victory without fail. No matter what obstacles we face, it is crucial that we transform the situation and realize victory right where we are. This is the way of the Lotus Sutra” (April 18, 1997, *World Tribune*, pp. 9–11).

The most rewarding part about talking about this topic is that once someone realizes that they have a tendency toward self-doubt, they can then go through the process of healing. It really is a process of healing. Until you completely heal, you will continue to bleed. The benefits are wonderful. I get letters and postcards from artists telling me that through working and chanting to rid themselves of negative thoughts, they have become successful beyond their wildest dreams. We must clear the way for our creativity to be able to flow in a manner that will influence, inspire and touch the human heart — stemming from a happy and positive state of life. With this spirit...

Our SGI president says in *Learning From the Goshō: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin* (pp. 128–29): “*Spirit* means inner state of life, or one’s heart. It decides what

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we devote our lives to. It is the fundamental prayer on which we base our existence. A person's spirit is invisible but becomes manifest at a crucial moment. Not only that, it also controls everything about a person, each moment of every day — it is the fundamental determinant of one's life.

“The Kegon Sutra says, ‘The heart is like a skilled painter.’ Like a great painter, the heart freely creates representations of all things. One's heart is the designer, the painter, the sculptor and the architect of his or her being....

“It is our spirit, our life-moment, that counts. Our spirit is our hopes, our prayers. And it can also be identified with the subconscious.

“‘What kind of future do I envision?’, we may ask ourselves. ‘What kind of self am I trying to develop? What do I want to accomplish in my life?’ We should paint this vision of our lives in our hearts as specifically as possible. This ‘painting’ becomes the design for our future. The power of the heart enables us to actually execute a wonderful masterpiece in accordance with that design. This is the doctrine of a life-moment possessing three thousand realms.

“The more specific and detailed the blueprint we have in our hearts, the better. The point is to continue vividly painting the target we have and to advance toward that goal single-mindedly. Then, at each instant, the reality of our lives will gradually approach the painting that is our aspiration.

“Everything depends on what is in our hearts. Heartfelt prayers will definitely be answered. If we decide that something is impossible, then consistent with our minds in thinking so, even things possible will become impossible. On the other hand, if we have the confidence that we can definitely do something, we are already one step closer to achieving it.”

Complete freedom in your life is possible. In the past, I seemed to attract negative people to me. Now they shy away. I am now very much aware of people who try to slander, abuse, take advantage, use, disrespect or dishonor me, and I do not permit it. I realize that I was a slave to my own negativity. Now I can truly feel more compassion and appreciation for other people because I appreciate and have compassion for myself. Unhappiness, misery and depression used to be my comfort zone. True indestructible happiness was alien to me. I didn't think it was really attainable. Now, with my new happy state of life, I can never go back to the other again. I feel like I no longer practice Buddhism in my head, but in my heart. I've learned that a change of destiny doesn't just happen, you have to work at it.

Please be kind to your fellow artists. We all get so little of that from society in general. As artists we sometimes live in an isolated world, a world where we can feel completely alone. That's why extraordinary acts of human kindness bring about extraordinary benefit in our lives and are great sources of propagating this Buddhism.

Please always remember that we are unique, a one of a kind. All of us are. No two performances, works of art, poems or books are ever alike. Every waking moment of every human being is influenced by an artist. The coffee cup we drink from, the clothes we wear, our cars, our houses, televisions, movies, radio, theater, music, even our shoes and socks, all come from the creative imagination of artists just like us.

I love what Broadway star Tommy Tune says about life in his book *Footnotes*: “It's all so completely simplistic, so frustratingly complex. This is not a dress rehearsal. **THIS IS THE SHOW!**”

I hope that as artists we can create great fortune for ourselves and become happy, suc-

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cessful and wealthy so that we can do even more for kosen-rufu. The world will not survive without us. We have the power to reach out and bring human life to the Gohonzon through our art. Our talent is our gift; use it in a positive way. Be it from the written word, the spoken word, from a gallery or museum wall, from the stage, from the television, radio or a movie theater — art has the power to touch and move the human heart like nothing else in the world. That's how powerful our lives are .

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