

RYAN'S EXPERIENCE: LIVE TRUE TO YOURSELF

I am 18 years old and have been around this Buddhist practice since I was 6. My mom has been practicing since then, but I did not actually start until I was 13. I come from a poor, single parent family. Money has always been a big struggle for us. Because of this, my mom always stressed the value of getting a high quality education in a field that is in demand. She sacrificed much of her time and money so my two brothers and I could attend private schools. However, one problem was that the only semi-affordable schools were Catholic. This brought many struggles.

Two things separated me from everyone else in my class — I was poor and Buddhist. Because of my financial situation and difference in religion, it seemed that many people saw me as inferior. I never felt like I quite fit in, and it was difficult to find even a few close friends at school. Whenever I invited classmates to my home, they'd ask why I lived in a mobile home instead of a "real" house or why I was *Buddhist* instead of Catholic. *None* of them saw the person *I really was*. They only saw what made me different.

I then became really introverted, which turned out to be somewhat of a benefit. It prompted me to focus all my efforts into studying more, striving for greater knowledge and academic excellence. But then this made it even harder for me to fit in with my classmates.

However, I felt the need to be accepted somewhere. This prompted me to attend SGI meetings on a regular basis. These meetings were the one place where I fit in and could meet other people my age that held similar values. I began to love going to meetings.

As I began chanting consistently, I never relaxed my thirst for knowledge. I realized that everything that seemed like an obstacle was really a benefit. Because my circumstances were so different from my classmates, my values were also very different. From then on, I never felt I needed to fit in by having the best clothes or the coolest shoes. I didn't really care if others thought I was cool. My only concern was whether or not I was using my talents to become a better person.

Soon I began to really appreciate certain aspects of my life, most importantly, my family: my mom would go without things she wanted so that money could be spent on my brothers and me. She always did this without complaining and measured her success by how happy her sons could become. I also appreciate my brothers. They were a constant source of encouragement. Although I felt out of place at school, I always felt quite secure at home because my family was so encouraging.

The support and encouragement that I received from my family and SGI members alike helped me to focus on one specific goal — to attend Stanford University. I knew that I would have to work especially hard in school, but this goal seemed impossible because of financial constraints. At that time during my sophomore year, my mom was paying about \$1,000 a year for my schooling alone and this was a great financial burden. I couldn't imagine how my family could handle over 30 times that amount! However I was determined that things would work out and chanted so that we could find a way to pay this amount. I was *not* about to let financial struggles get in the way of one of my greatest goals.

During the next couple of years, I continued to work hard, but I often worried about my family's financial state. It seemed there was less and less money coming in every month. This prompted my mom, who already chanted a tremendous amount, to really step up her chanting. She never gave up, no matter how insurmountable the problems

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seemed to become.

When I had to make the decision for myself whether I wanted to practice or not, the power of my mom's faith was truly beneficial in convincing me of the value of this Buddhism. I increased the time and consistency I put into my practice and knew that I could always take my problems to the Gohonzon. This helped me tremendously in all aspects of my life.

Before I knew it, I was starting my senior year, the year in which I would apply to Stanford. However, my family's financial situation became tremendously difficult. We missed a rent payment and were evicted from the mobile home park where we lived. This required us to physically move our mobile home to a new location.

None of us had any extra time in our lives to engage in such a massive undertaking. My mom was working fulltime, my older brother, Ian, was getting ready for "his" freshman year at Stanford, and my younger brother, Kevan, was starting third grade. Since Stanford is on the quarter system, Ian did not have to be there until a few weeks after I started school and was able to do a lot of the work. However, I still had to miss days of school to help and began to fall behind in my studies and in preparing my Stanford application, which was almost due.

My priorities shifted from getting into Stanford to having a place to live. My practice waned, and I saw my grades drop. I was really struggling and had a negative attitude because of all the obstacles in my life that seemed to occur in this very short period of time. My mom saw that my practice was weak and strongly encouraged me to go to meetings — meetings that I really didn't think I had time for. She knew that without strong faith, I wouldn't get into Stanford or be successful in any aspect of my life. Although I grumbled about going, I really *did* appreciate these activities and saw what a great effect they had on my attitude. Because of the my mom's tremendous encouragement, I was able to change my attitude for the better and to do a quality job on my application, finishing it just in time.

Because of my change in attitude, I can now truly appreciate my life and the incredible fortune I have accumulated. Through my experience of moving, I saw the tremendous quality of the few friends that I made in high school — a dramatic change from how lonely I felt before. My friends were always emotionally supportive at school, and even helped out on the weekends with the big move.

In addition, I have been able to keep my grades high and also score high on the SAT. These accomplishments took a lot of work (I got less than five hours of sleep as I struggled to maintain my grades). But I kept my nose to the grindstone with the determination not to begrudge my life.

All my struggles paid off! On Dec. 15 of last year, I received the reply from Stanford that I had been accepted! This was a major victory in itself, but a month after I received my letter of acceptance, I received my financial aid statement. I would only have to pay about \$1,500 per year! And I would receive \$2,000 a year in loans! The remainder of my tuition and room and board would be completely paid for! I had to pay *less than a tenth* of the total tuition cost.

Often, when everyone around you tells you that you cannot succeed, you start to believe it. However, if you have strong faith in the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and a strong determination, even if others say you can't succeed, you can attain your goal regardless of these negative influences. I am thankful for my family — especially my mom — because they inspired me to develop my faith and continue no matter what. Also, I am

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thankful that I belong to the SGI organization that constantly offers positive reinforcement. Now I know for sure that anyone can accomplish what they want if they have courage, determination and faith. As SGI President Ikeda states:

“It is trivial to worry about appearances and others’ opinions or to complain that no one supports or understands you. Please live true to yourself, as you have every right to, and adorn your life with triumph, based on resolute prayer and action. Please become a person who powerfully activates the protective forces of the universe, the heavenly deities” (March 5, 1999, *World Tribune*, p. 4).

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