

## **FEELING A PART OF THE 'CHORUS' EXPERIENCE — STEPHÁN EATON, SEATTLE, WASH.**

It was New Year's Eve of 1997, and I wondered what will be my resolution for the year? I didn't know but I wanted something different — I wanted a change. I was tired of living in Boston. When I arrived in 1983, I vowed this wasn't the place for me to settle. I would give myself 10 years and then move on.

It was now 1997. I was working two jobs; sometimes it would alternate between one full time, one part time or both would be full time. Either way I still didn't have any money. I was sporadically supporting financially an overbearing, controlling ex-lover who was incarcerated. I was miserable and unhappy. I wanted to peel away all of these dead layers of skin that just seemed to have weighed me down.

Little did I know big changes in my future were going to happen when I met a young woman on June 7, 1997, at a social gathering in Boston. We talked the night away but not once in our conversation did she mention that she was Buddhist. I knew I wanted to spend as much time as I could with her before she left for Seattle. Kenya was new life to me. She made me think about things positively and pointed out to me that I am responsible for my karma.

One day while visiting New York, I heard gongyo for the very first time when Kenya sat down to recite her morning prayers. It was music to my ears. Not knowing what to do, I sat very still, not wanting to disturb the rhythmic music I was hearing. This was my introduction to the Buddhist practice.

I had heard the words Nam-myoho-renge-kyo before, but it was obvious that there was much more to this phrase until now. We spent part of the day looking for the New York Culture Center. When we found it, I was floored — there was a lot of genuine concern, passion and happiness among the people. I was wondering, "Where have I been?" I wanted to be a part of this.

As our relationship blossomed, so did my interest in the Buddhist practice. My first visit to the SGI center here in Seattle was on Jan. 1, 1998, New Year's Day gongyo — I was excited. So many people, so much rhythm, I wanted to belong to this chorus. Not knowing the words to gongyo, everyone going so fast, I followed along in the book until they came to a part I did know: Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I said it with such passion and conviction that I felt good that I was able to say my part and feel like a part of this chorus.

As I was introduced to various people and observed others around me, I could see and feel that people were genuinely vibrant and lively as they were in New York. Seven months after meeting Kenya, I was not feeling as weighed down as I had when the new year of 1997 rang in.

I wanted to be a part of this faith. Other faiths I've encountered never made me feel like I belonged nor did I want to belong. Upon my departure back to Boston, I was given the prayer book.

When left to your own vices, some of us are more apt to settle and this is what I did when it came to learning gongyo. I settled to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo only because I was afraid to challenge myself to learn the whole prayer. However, there were certain parts I could pronounce that lead to my desire to stumble through other sections of gongyo.

I remember one day feeling down and unhappy, but was determined to do and get

through all of gongyo. I was chanting so hard, oblivious to the rainy weather conditions or anything around me. I couldn't help thinking, "Wow, there is no greater happiness for human beings than chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, just as Nichiren Daishonin says."

Since I started to chant, I've severed all communication with my ex. I never thought I would drive cross-country by myself, from Boston to Seattle, but I did. Kenya and I are engaged. But most of all, I feel alive. I feel lighter and I am relaxed.

My days are not as hectic. I don't always feel overwhelmed. So I will continue to chant whenever possible. I know if I can do it, anyone can do it.

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