

REVIVING A SENSE OF MISSION EXPERIENCE BY DAVID RUSH MORRISON, LOS ANGELES

I'm a cinematographer. I shoot feature films, commercials, music videos and documentaries. I've been practicing this Buddhism for five years. I started for two reasons. First, I wanted to activate my career as a cinematographer. Second, I wanted to feel happiness again. My life at 27 had become so career-obsessed that my life-condition was based on how well my career was or wasn't going. The frustration that I experienced felt like an ever-hardening shell that drained any enthusiasm and joy out of life. I started to feel like a shadow of my once vibrant, youthful self. I needed to change desperately and that is when I was introduced to the practice by my girlfriend and her friend Lendon. I remember going to my first meeting, hearing gongyo and seeing the determination and compassion in people's eyes. I knew that this had to be a valid practice. I decided to give it three months.

At first I started practicing on the fringes of the SGI. Coming from the South had made me somewhat cynical about organized religion. I was distrustful of organizations, especially ones with presidents. I didn't understand why we needed an organization to attain enlightenment. My idea of enlightenment was that one could be totally immune from life's ups and downs. I used my chanting to attain a "Zen" quality. In hindsight I was aiming for the world of Rapture, and I was easily discouraged when circumstances knocked me out of this state. After going to group meetings I formed connections with a few members who encouraged me greatly. I was asked to lead meetings and give experiences. That was about the extent of it. I didn't attend any functions on a large scale or volunteer my time for any events.

Studying is what started to open my eyes to the profundity of this practice. *Ichinen sanzen*, the ten worlds and dependent origination were all concepts that I tried to absorb with my life. I started to become impressed by President Ikeda's knowledge of all of these areas. Even in the areas outside of Buddhism. He seemed so well read and informed on many topics. My determination and commitment grew through study, which in turn expanded my *ichinen* and then deepened my prayer. I started to see changes in my environment. Yes, Buddhism worked for me, too. However I was still distrustful of the change in our lives. We had a beautiful baby Buddha girl whom we named Keely. We bought our first house, and my career, while not yet fully realized, was moving along and I could definitely see progress. I got an agent, a few more feature films under my belt, and my name was starting to get around town. The distractions that one would associate with Hollywood really didn't get in my way because my practice kept me "real," so to speak. The process of building this career, being a new father, a husband and a homeowner didn't leave much time to be a Buddhist. My chanting started to lessen and my attendance to meetings began to drop. I faded even further toward the fringes of the SGI.

After completing another film this past spring my chanting was at an all time low. "Why do I chant?" I asked myself. Life will continue to progress as it does for many others who don't practice. I saw successful, happy people who didn't chant, so why did I need to? I felt my contribution to *kosen-rufu* was staying at home raising a peaceful, loving family. I started to feel that Buddhism may have been something that presented itself in my life for a short period of time and maybe I should move on and dedicate my energies elsewhere. However, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. "Why do I chant?" I thought.

That's when the phone rang. My friend Beth Lemure called to ask if I would be inter-

ested in shooting some footage for the 1999 Youth Grand Culture Festival. I usually do anything that Beth asks because she always deeply encourages me. She's a gem. The effect of hanging out with her always makes me want to chant more. One night she and Cory Taylor came to my house to relay their vision of the event. After hearing their explanation of what the culture festival meant for society — bridging the gaps between cultures — I was hooked. It would be an enormous cause for unity in the 21st century. Los Angeles is the perfect place for this to begin because of our diverse cultures. I thought of my daughter growing up in an environment where there were no boundaries between people, far from my experience as a child of the South. I knew that I had to sign up. It was my responsibility as a father and as an Angelino and as an absentee Buddhist. What would my job be? What do I need to do?

My job was to go to Hawaii, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, Dallas and Denver to follow President Ikeda's footsteps on his first trip to America in 1960. My mission was to capture the fruits of his labors for kosen-rufu by photographing all of the youth. Chanting had never been so easy or purposeful. I started to feel what kosen-rufu meant with my whole being. What I hadn't understood intellectually, now suddenly made perfect sense. I understood it with my life. My muscles and cells existed for one purpose. My life depended on it. Cory gave us wonderful context by reading passages from *The New Human Revolution*, volume 1, and showing us archival photos from President Ikeda's trip. I learned that President Ikeda was 32 at the time. I was 32 as well. I kept reading and chanting. "Get closer to President Ikeda" was my determination.

On the morning that we left for Hawaii I had a mystic experience. I saw my good friend Lendon at the airport. He was also leaving for Hawaii but was going on vacation. It was amazing to feel this rebirth in my practice and see the person who helped nurture me in the practice. While flying to our assigned cities, Darrin and I read about President Ikeda and how he inspired all of the pioneer members with heartfelt warm encouragement and stern reinforcement when it was needed. The many dimensions of President Ikeda's compassion and his intuitive sense how to best encourage people were illuminating and inspiring for me. I was so energized by his life. His efforts were absolutely tireless in propagating kosen-rufu on our continent. Six cities in six days: I determined that my efforts would be tireless, too.

We met so many inspiring bodhisattvas who spared nothing in their efforts to help us, all of them vibrant with smiles and shared determinations. I started to see what the SGI was made of. My respect deepened immensely. When President Ikeda was in Chicago he witnessed racism toward an African-American child. This event deeply saddened President Ikeda; heartbroken but determined, he chanted sincere daimoku to foster a society in which this did not exist. Thirty-seven years later I witnessed members in Chicago of all races unified for the same purpose. Color wasn't even an issue. President Ikeda literally penetrated the environment with his prayer and I witnessed it manifest in my life. It's an amazing experience to see someone's determinations realized years later, right in front of your eyes, and being captured by your lens. There is nothing more important than the lives of people. I kept chanting that these images would inspire everyone by showing how vast but sincere our organization is.

We had the fortune to meet the pioneer members that President Ikeda personally encouraged. On the journey my life had never felt so dynamic. If it weren't for gravity I would have flown!

After our video was shown at the culture festival, a new friend from San Francisco told

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me that she was so inspired by seeing all of the members around the world. Others said that they cried when they saw our footage. I'm deeply grateful for the experience. I've never before felt like I was receiving great benefit and making great causes at the same time.

I now know why I chant and why I'll continue to chant. Buddhism is truth and reason. The most noble cause to represent! I haven't met or seen President Ikeda but that's not important. I feel him in my heart. I try to emulate his actions by encouraging people. After this experience I often think about him wherever I am and I try to realize his wisdom and life force in my own life. I literally try to penetrate my environment with daimoku and prayer. I think understanding the spirit of President Ikeda is the spirit of Buddhism. In exerting myself for the cause of enlightening others I illuminate my own path. I now see the SGI for what it is — brilliant members, bright, intelligent, and courageous people who are committed to realizing a safe and nurturing environment. I am so honored to be a part of you. As a Buddhist, I feel that I have arrived. I want to play that old disco song, "I'm coming out, I want the world to know, I want to let it show." I'm down for the struggle. I will dedicate my life, creating a better world for our children and their children. With my life I will set an example. I will embrace struggles courageously. Time is of the essence and I know our vital cause for world peace is at a crucial time. I am deeply honored to share this most sacred mission with all of you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.