

EXPERIENCE—CEPHAS RILEY JOHNSON, WASHINGTON, D.C. THE DIFFERENCE BUDDHISM MAKES IN MY LIFE

Introduced to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism while in prison, Cephas Johnson reforms his life through chanting, and is released after 22 years.

I was born in Lynchburg, Va., on July 6, 1955. I spent my youth in Southeast Washington, D.C., the poorest section of the city. My father and mother always struggled to make ends meet. They raised seven children under tough conditions while living in the worst public housing project in the city.

Seeing other people enjoy a better life than ours dimmed my youthful hope for a better future by the moment, so I became reckless and sought refuge in the criminal life.

Eventually, I dropped out of high school, lost my girlfriend and then all hell broke loose. I was imprisoned at a youth correctional facility for burglary. There I came in contact with hard-core criminals. Upon my release in 1975 at age 19, I was vicious, mean-spirited and a danger to others and myself.

My family mistrusted me because they thought I would lead my sisters and brothers into using drugs. My environment was a source of great unhappiness and my life was full of hatred, pain and anger; I felt betrayed and lonely. I entered into a depression, and dug myself into a deeper drug habit all the while continuing to steal to support it. On Feb. 12, 1976, I was arrested, and on Sept. 29 that year I was tried, convicted and sentenced to prison for repeated robberies and first-degree murder. I was given a natural life term in the Maryland prison system and a consecutive 15-year term in the D.C. system.

In prison, I learned not to depend on anybody. I was tough and uncaring, and I lost all compassion and humanism. My family seemed relieved that I was in prison. They often said they were glad I was safe, especially when they would bring me news about the imprisonment or death of my friends and fellow gang members. All my former gang members continued with drugs; many were arrested and imprisoned; and almost all are dead by now.

I experimented with Islam and Christianity while in prison, but I still wasn't happy. Then on July 25, 1984, I made up my mind to become healthy and on that day I quit taking drugs. I had been fighting my murder conviction all along, and in 1985, my appeal reached the Maryland State Supreme Court. That panel said they would not overturn my conviction, even though in 1976 a similar case (in which a person who was part of a burglary group was arrested and a member of that group had killed someone, though the person arrested had not himself committed the murder) was overturned. In spite of the bitter disappointment I felt on hearing the Maryland Supreme Court would not connect my case to that earlier one because it occurred prior to my conviction, I determined to continue to improve myself.

By this time I had earned my GED from prison. I had attended the mandatory psychological counseling and anti-violence programs and put my all into each, making a "grade A" effort. I continued to stay off drugs; I was not drinking alcohol; I was not smoking cigarettes. I read many books about positive thinking, thinking rich, and Black choice. I discovered a love for writing. I entered an essay competition on the subject of prison reform, and placed eleventh out of 300 entries. I am proud of this—a lot of the educated guys in prison gave me stiff competition!

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After I'd served 15 years in Maryland, my case came up for parole. Still, I served 18-and-a-half years in Maryland before the outgoing Maryland governor, Donald Schaeffer, signed my parole in 1994. I feel very fortunate to have been up for parole right at that time, because the incoming governor, Parris Glendening, vowed he would never parole anyone convicted to a life sentence.

From the Maryland penitentiary, I was paroled into the Lorton Penitentiary to serve my 15-year term for burglary in the District of Columbia. It was at Lorton that I met Dr. Alwin Harding and my life changed forever.

In June 1995, a friend, Bruce Sterling, introduced me to the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin. Bruce was paralyzed from a vicious stabbing and used to wheel himself around to attend the Buddhist meetings held at the prison hospital by Dr. Harding. Bruce encouraged me to open my mind and receive the teachings of Buddhism with a clear vision. I desperately felt I needed to experience the religion that seemed to bring so much joy into Bruce's life.

Each Monday, we met Dr. Harding in a group, and strengthened our faith, practice and study. Dr. Harding told us about his experience in faith, driving home to us that if we chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, things would change. I asked him hard questions, coming from my study of Christianity and Islam, but he never put down any other religion. He patiently explained Buddhism to us. The *World Tribune* and *Seikyo Times* (now *Living Buddhism*) gave me a different perspective on things than I'd ever encountered in the other religions I'd studied.

Still today, one of my favorite quotes from Nichiren Daishonin's writings comes from Dr. Harding's encouragement to me during these discussions. He would often recite from "Happiness in this World": "Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life, and continuing chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, no matter what happens. How could this be anything other than the boundless joy of the Law?" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 681).

It made sense to me that everybody, in all religions, goes through things, both good and bad, but how you deal with it determines whether you'll be stronger or not. I realized the choice is mine. When I'm doing bad, what do I do? Just resort to negativity? When I'm doing good, do I forget where my benefits came from? No. No matter what, I'm going to stay in front of the Gohonzon, and as long as I stick it out, I can't fail to achieve my goals and become happy.

When I decided to give Buddhism my all, something changed within me. I became calm and confident. I started being more open and receptive instead of defensive and arrogant. I had a powerful desire to get out of prison. I knew that if what Dr. Harding said was true, I could bring about the change I desired in my life. I resolved to chant, no matter how I felt. I would chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo every morning for at least 45 minutes to an hour, in the evenings for an hour, and at night for an hour. I felt great. The truth of having Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in my life was revealed on May 22, 1998, when, after 22 years, I was released from prison.

I received the Gohonzon on Sept. 4 of last year. I am now chanting and doing gongyo in Southeast District, and I have become the group leader of Trinidad Group there.

I am no longer a criminal on the streets. In fact, I now take care of the streets you drive on and walk through. I work for the District of Columbia Department of Public Works. What a difference Nam-myoho-renge-kyo makes! I became a permanent employee this

year in October. The power of the Gohonzon, and my commitment to faith, practice and study, have allowed me to develop the material well-being I longed for in my youth. My struggles to overcome my drug addiction were great, but the desire has not reared its old ugly head. My faith in the Lotus Sutra gives me the strength to realize the power I have inside.

The most important thing to me at this moment in my life is that I make a positive difference in the lives of my parents, family and friends. Many sleepless nights, I prayed that I would not die in prison. I vowed that if given a chance I would make a difference; I would create value and bring happiness to my life and that of others.

My parents' trust in me has returned to the point where I often do their banking. That would not have happened 22 years ago. I'm so happy that I can bring happiness to my parents by being a responsible and trustworthy person.

I often meet and contact friends from the past and present who are now encouraged by my new life. Every day that I succeed and win encourages other people to seek and embrace this Buddhism. This is my mission. I've learned to appreciate the real meaning of freedom, and will continue to polish my practice of faith to develop more humility. The practice of faith has helped me realize that my real purpose is to stay focused on the main things that got me here today: chanting and communicating with SGI-USA leaders and members alike, and keeping the principles of faith, practice and study as the focal points of my life.

In closing, I want to personally thank Dr. Alwin Harding for introducing me to this practice. I love him for his compassion and for this great opportunity to be a person of value. I would like also to thank Dan Durett and my fellow members in Southeast District for being there in the rough times. And my thanks to each of you for allowing me to share how Nam-myoho-renge-kyo has made a difference in my life.

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