

OPENING MY HEART BY VINCENT GARREAU, JAPAN

As a child, I always had the ambition to excel in everything I undertook. I had to be first in class and in gymnastics championships, and I had to succeed where others had failed. I needed to gain the respect, recognition and admiration of all. This tendency led me to experience extreme obsessions and great frustrations. I felt that I never got enough and that I was never good enough. My moments of jubilation were often followed by a mental state of depression. Somehow I managed to keep hoping that, one day, I would be successful and happy, but when? How? Where? I was looking for love, but loved neither others nor myself.

At the age of 21, after graduating from a prestigious business school, and in search of ideal love, I decided to leave France—where no one understood me—to travel, meet different people and become a member of the international jet set. The grass had to be greener on the other side. After many business trips abroad, I had become what people would call a young, successful, high-voltage businessman who had it all but who was sometimes impatient and self-centered, unable to distinguish what is essential from what is superfluous.

Traveling and living abroad allowed me to meet many different people, but I found myself most fascinated by Asian people—they seemed to be masters of their own destiny and to be more balanced than I had ever learned to be.

In January 1992, my company transferred me to its Tokyo branch. After two years of commuting between Europe, Japan and other Asian countries, I realized I was always passing over and passing through places, like a satellite. I was dissatisfied with just about everything, including my working conditions, and always felt that “others” didn’t understand or appreciate me enough.

At around this time, I met a young Japanese businessman whose compassion and apparent happiness intrigued me. He told me he was practicing Nichiren Buddhism. Despite previous disappointing experiences with religion in general, I decided to learn more about this Buddhism which, he said, could help bring out one’s life force to create happiness for oneself as well as others.

Through the practice of Nichiren Buddhism, I realized the inherent connection between my attitude and my environment. Not only did my working conditions improve, but also my responsibilities within the company rose like an arrow. My life started to gear toward others. When hiring new staff, I was able to consider not only the company’s needs, but also whether the position would offer long-term advancement opportunities for the new employee. I was also determined to work harder than everyone else, to set a good example, knowing that others were following in my footsteps. I would do my best to value each employee’s unlimited potential. I feel that my past efforts to intervene against the dismissal of some employees and the time I dedicated to training them bore fruit, and these people are today key players in the company. This change of attitude toward others helped me advance in my work and in my life in general. Through my Buddhist practice, I was able to see the jewel that exists in each person’s life, to look at myself and polish my own. I am 36, and my functions as general manager of an industrial ceramics company do not allow for much leisure time. However, I am always trying to redouble my efforts and to dedicate myself equally to my work, my Buddhist activities, social activities and my friends and

relatives.

With the money I have saved, I was finally able to buy an old house by the sea in western France and renovate it with my parents. This house is now a meeting place for my family and an anchor in my life. I visit this house several times a year. Last winter I was there when storms wrecked an oil tanker on the coast, causing enormous damage to the beaches. I found myself joining the recovery effort, cleaning up after others for the sake of our precious environment.

What I have learned is that if I want something to change, I have to change myself first and inspire others to do the same. In this way, we can all work together toward building a more harmonious society. Happiness does not exist in a distant land. Neither does the cause of problems. Everything lies within our lives. Rather than looking for recognition from others, I am striving to open my heart to them. And it works!

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