

EXPERIENCE—BARBARA FOX, LOS ANGELES OFFERINGS FROM THE HEART

Barbara Fox rediscovers the joy of financial contribution.

I began practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism at age 17 in 1971. My best friend from my Jewish youth group had begun several years earlier and took painstaking efforts to explain everything she knew about Buddhism to me. Once, as a new member, I had just 25 cents to last for two days. I was in college and was accustomed to being low on funds. I bought two oranges to place on my altar in appreciation to the Gohonzon. The same night I was deluged with 25 pounds of steak, a dinner invitation and an unsolicited delivery of delicious Chinese food left on my doorstep by a friend. Needless to say, I was incredulous. I felt there were fundamental principles at play that I did not yet understand.

Of course, in my 29 years of practice, I've seen remarkable transformations in myself and others who practice Buddhism. A dear friend once told me that she wanted her life to be a radiant example of the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. It touched me deeply, and I determined to do the same. Much of the following came as a result of challenging myself to make that determination a reality.

Fast forward to 1981, when I became an esthetician. My 19-year career in skincare has been more than fulfilling. I've taught, traveled and lectured for work. I've set up spas, been on television and was named one of Los Angeles' top facialists by *Los Angeles Magazine*. Three years ago, I was invited to set up a "Spa Treatment" program at a highly respected massage institute in Santa Monica, Calif. I gained my Post Secondary and Graduate Vocational Instructor's Credential from the State of California and began teaching massage therapists to do spa treatments. I became a masseuse as well.

It was eight years earlier that I decided to work for myself. I thought this would give me the financial freedom I deserved. Let me tell you, I have never faced such hardship. Building a business from scratch was a challenge, but I had become quite a risk taker. My many years of practice had given me the courage to go forward. Little did I know that working for myself had little to do with making money. The lessons I learned went far beyond my pocketbook.

I could no longer contribute financially monthly to the SGI, something I had begun when I was a new member. Yes, contributions can take many forms: time, energy, effort, etc. But it also takes money to keep our doors open, lights on and pay for basic organizational needs, such as paper and upkeep of our community centers. I made special efforts to participate in our annual May contribution activity, but a monthly contribution was out of the question. It seemed I was getting poorer and poorer. I loved working for myself, but I wasn't getting ahead financially. Still, I was determined to succeed. I loved my work and chanted for my clients' happiness on a regular basis.

Then suddenly, my father became deathly ill. He contracted a virus from a mosquito bite, which caused swelling in his brain, giving him instant dementia. He could no longer speak, and lost the use of most of his faculties. My family went into shock. It was overwhelming and caused unspeakable grief. It became a five-year saga of visiting my parents every three or four weeks in Arizona to lend whatever support I could, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, crying my eyes out, then starting again.

My parents are incredible—truly kind and pure-hearted people. They have fully supported my Buddhist practice throughout the years in every way imaginable. They’ve accumulated great blessings and fortune as a result of their kind hearts. I can’t say enough about them.

The thought occurred to me that my father might die. A deep pillar of determination rose up within me. The only way to truly repay my parents for their kindness and love was to become happy—absolutely happy and successful. This helped me traverse my grief.

The freedom of working for myself enabled me to visit my parents often. Had I worked for anyone else, I would have surely been fired. And you know what? I had the good fortune to do what I needed to do when I needed to do it.

Through the painstaking challenge of facing my father’s illness, all of our hearts have opened. He is much better now. Although not completely cured by any means, he is in a much happier state of life than he has been for most of his life. He plays the piano now—his own compositions—and laughs more than ever. He has regained the use of most of his faculties, and we’ve come through the darkness together—a harrowing journey to say the least.

Then, last May, the annual contribution activity brought another opportunity to challenge myself to make a hearty donation. While collecting for our chapter at the community center, a member handed over a large check—a very large check. I had given what felt like a sizable amount and was happy to do so. It was somewhat of a stretch, but not fully. When I saw her large check, I began to cry because I realized that she had so much appreciation for the SGI that she gave her money freely, with an open heart. I had gotten so used to being “poor” that I couldn’t imagine giving anyone that amount of money—ever. She gave it quietly, with no fanfare whatsoever.

In working for myself, I was so busy surviving and dealing with my grief over my father’s illness that I had lost the momentum—or was too worn out—to become “wealthy for the sake of kosen-rufu” for myself. My true wish is to become so successful—so absolutely flourishing in body, mind and spirit—that I inspire all whom I meet to fulfill their blueprint mission. I pray this way every single day during the fourth silent prayer of gongyo.

Also, my resolve to expand my capacity to contribute financially had somehow waned. I owe everything I am to my parents and this wonderful Buddhist practice. I intensified my prayers to demonstrate the greatness of my life and the influence that Buddhism has had on me and contributed another check for half the amount of the first check. I needed to make an overriding cause to reassemble my karmic configuration. In other words, I wanted my life to explode with joy and abundance.

Then, suddenly, my parents surprised me with a check for a huge amount of money. I was astounded. It enabled me to pay bills, etc. My parents are truly kind and generous people—they’re angels. A wonderful change in my work toward the end of last year brought about a sizable increase in my monthly income, enabling me to stabilize financially, become debt free and, for the first time, save money. I was able to follow through with my commitment to contribute a sizable monthly amount to the SGI in this year of 2000. Recently, I was able to secure a financial portfolio that will ensure my future.

I can honestly say that the principle of cause and effect is ultra-strict, and that our motivations give rise to all of our results. By praying with the staunch resolve “I am successful for the sake of kosen-rufu,” “I am happy for the sake of kosen-rufu,” I am overcoming any negative karmic residue and using it to create value. I truly believe that

the purity and goodness we gain from practicing are our greatest rewards. The fruits of monetary success can only enhance our existence on this earth; our ability to inspire and uplift others.

As SGI President Ikeda has said: “Material possessions cannot be enjoyed after death. But millionaires rich in life force are able to freely make use of the treasures of the universe in lifetime after lifetime and enjoy a journey of eternal happiness. That is what constitutes proof of true victory in life” (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 117).

Thank you, my brothers and sisters, who spread this exquisite teaching of profound freedom and beauty.