

## EXPERIENCE—DEBBIE LIPTAN, PORTLAND, ORE. DISCARDING MY PROVISIONAL TEACHING

### Debbie Liptan discovers the true meaning of SGI President Ikeda's guidance that 'the purpose of life is to be happy.'

It's remarkable. I've now been practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism with the SGI for over 30 years. That's almost two-thirds (not quite) of my life! I have so much manifest fortune—marriage, child, home, financial and job, health. And yet...

About two years ago, I became aware of an increasingly unbearable discomfort inside of me. I absolutely could not relax, no matter what situation I was in. Indeed, I was facing a few stressful situations—especially at work. However, it was nothing compared to serious problems I had faced and overcome in the past, using my practice to face and change myself.

But there it was. I felt like I was having a nervous breakdown. I could not stop crying, even at work. It became clear to me that I needed to understand something much more deeply about the life of the Buddha than I ever had before.

So, I started a journey, a quest. At the beginning, it seemed to me, I was trying to resolve a question that had plagued me since I started my practice. What does it mean to attain Buddhahood as we are? And how does that sync with "striving" to do our human revolution? If we attain Buddhahood exactly as we are, why are we encouraged to change ourselves, i.e. do human revolution?

I started seeking answers to long unanswered (and unasked) questions. It was a bit scary. In addition to chanting and deeply studying the Goshō (Nichiren Daishonin's writings) over and over—especially "On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime"—I also sought some professional help. I was feeling way too emotionally unstable and needed an objective viewpoint to give me honest feedback.

Wow. What an incredible journey this has been. One revelation after another. The first big breakthrough happened when I was attending a conference last year on "Enhancing Our Relationships" at the Florida Nature and Culture Center with my husband. In one of the small group discussions, my group included two other women with the same religious upbringing as me. As we discussed our assigned topic, we started to realize that the three of us had a similar issue. It did not seem appropriate to have our own happiness as a goal in life. All our lives, the images we had been raised with were those of people who were "self-sacrificing," virtuous people who suffered for the sake of others.

As I studied the Goshō, I started to focus in on Nichiren Daishonin's admonition to "discard the provisional teachings." I had never paid a lot of attention to those words. I assumed they were intended for people who practiced an inferior form of Buddhism. Now I started to wonder. Here are his exact words:

"Even though you chant and believe in Myōhō-rensō-kyō, if you think the Law is outside yourself, you are embracing not the Mystic Law but an inferior teaching. 'Inferior teaching' means those other than this [Lotus] sutra, which are all expedient and provisional..."

"Your practice of the Buddhist teachings will not relieve you of the sufferings of birth and death in the least unless you perceive the true nature of your life. If you seek

enlightenment outside yourself, then your performing even ten thousand practices and ten thousand good deeds will be in vain” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 3).

Wow again. This passage exactly describes how I felt. I have practiced diligently and sincerely for all these years. And yet, I could not feel joy in my own life. What was my provisional teaching?

I soon had an answer to that prayer, thanks to one of my leaders. I was having a conversation with her one night about various organizational matters and I found myself becoming increasingly agitated about how the conversation was going. By the time I hung up, I was totally distraught. I even had a hard time chanting about it. And yet, I had to ask myself, what was my problem? This person, I am absolutely sure, had no idea whatsoever that I was having a problem with the conversation. I had maintained my “bright, positive attitude” throughout our conversation and fell apart when I hung up the phone.

The next morning I had to face it, because I had to do morning gongyo and there was no avoiding how I was feeling. I could barely chant, I was crying so much. Finally, I said to the Gohonzon: “Okay. Whatever it is, bring it on and let’s be done with it.”

Suddenly, as I chanted, I saw that at the very deepest levels of my life, the nuns of my childhood were inextricably linked with my SGI (and formerly NSA) leaders. Deep inside me, they were the same entity. I believed that I had to live up to their expectations—or what I perceived to be their expectations—in order to be seen to have strong faith and be a valuable “capable person” for kosen-rufu. I had not changed my fundamental view about how to live or view my life since I was in parochial school!

Now I was becoming determined to get to the bottom of what my own fundamental “provisional teaching” was. In preparation for the 10th anniversary of the “Clear Mirror” guidance that SGI President Ikeda gave to the women’s division, we all began refreshing our study of that precious gift. What was the very first guidance he gave in that speech? “The purpose of life is to be happy.” How simple. How profound. Funny, I had not really noticed that before. Did I think that guidance was for the faint of heart who didn’t really have the guts to suffer for the members? Actually, I think so.

So close, I could smell it. I was talking to my therapist—who by now is practically a Buddhist himself—about all of this, about my search for my “provisional teaching,” my realization that I’m not a happy person, that I want to be happy, but I have something stopping me, etc. He listened with great interest in what I was saying. Then he said to me: “You know, I see a lot of people in here. Some of them are really not happy. You are not one of them.”

Wow. I’m already a happy person? Wow. I see. I really do see. I am already a happy person. My personal provisional teaching is that I do not believe that happiness is an appropriate purpose in life. This is amazing. No matter how many incredible conspicuous and inconspicuous benefits I receive from my practice, I cannot let myself experience joy, because I believe in the depths of my life that it is not appropriate to want to be happy!

Now what? Something else from the very same Gosho struck me deeply: “...when you chant *myoho* and recite *rengo*, you must summon up deep faith that Myoho-rengo-kyo is your life itself” (WND, p. 3).

He did not say, “Hang in there and keep chanting...some day you’ll get it.” “Summon up,” he said. I have to do it myself. That’s what he’s saying. I can do it myself. I need to reform my life view, reprogram my underlying operating system.

So, here’s what I’m doing. Every day I tell myself three things, over and over again. They are: 1) I am a happy person; 2) Life is good; and 3) Everything will be fine.

I say this to myself when I'm chanting, driving in the car, walking down the street—whenever I find myself feeling that anxious, I-know-there's-a-catastrophe-I-must-prevent feeling. I am working to actually change how I view life. I have decided that this is the year that I begin to live as a Buddhist, not just practice Buddhism. I now know there is a huge difference.

And something else, too. I believe this is my mission, our mission, as American born Buddhists. Only we can get to the bottom of what will prevent someone raised in our culture from fully experiencing the joy of practice, the joy of life. As we uncover—each of us—our own “provisional teaching” and then discard it, we can share in our own unique language our discoveries with our fellow Americans. We are the Kumarajivas of American kosen-rufu. We can teach the essential spirit of Nichiren Daishonin to America!