

## EXPERIENCE—HELEN SCOFFIN, UNITED KINGDOM THE POWER OF PRAYER

**Chanting for specific goals brought Helen Scoffin rewards greater than she'd ever imagined.**

Looking back over almost 15 years of Buddhist practice, I can see that my life has taken directions I could not have imagined. The main battle of my practice has been conquering fear, self-doubt and self-dislike. This manifested in many different ways, so it often appeared that I was tackling other, more concrete problems.

At 17, I was diagnosed as having acromegaly, a form of gigantism caused by a tumor of the pituitary gland. Although the tumor was removed, I was left with a hormone imbalance that affects my fertility and puts strain on my heart. Excess levels of growth hormone meant that my hands, feet and jaw were liable to keep growing, and I had no menstrual periods. I was also considered to be at high risk of suffering diabetes and cancer. Acromegaly can be the cause of a “general reduction in lifespan,” to quote the reassurances of my doctors.

I became a bit of a medical curiosity, and the focus of my Buddhist practice was very much about fighting with doctors for control over my body, fighting to like myself and my appearance, and fighting to define myself as feminine when my body and the medical profession were defining me as abnormal and dysfunctional.

The first thing I ever chanted for was to start my periods without medical help. I remember setting a particular target date that coincided with a Buddhist activity I was involved in. Nothing happened on that day but what I gained out of the activity, and the chanting I had done toward it, was a sense of my own worth as a human being and as a woman, which was not dependent on my ability to have children. Two weeks later, I finally began menstruating — at the age of 20.

This was the first time I realized that chanting for specific goals often brings rewards greater than you had imagined. The lessons we learn on the way to achieving our goals are the important thing.

As the years went by, I realized that my self-doubt was affecting my ability to find work I could fully enjoy. I had fears around fitting into systems and bureaucracy, and general belated adolescent fears about not fitting in at all. My medical condition further emphasized my difference and I was always frightened to tell employers of my health record.

For more than a decade, I swung in and out of low paid temporary work, not realizing my potential and feeling unappreciated. Despite this, and criticisms from others that I “could be doing better,” I continued chanting to give my best in every situation, to create value no matter what. The turning point came in 1989, when I seriously began chanting to find my mission (which simply means “how to use one’s life”). The results of some blood tests indicated that my pituitary tumor had started growing again. My doctor told me I would have to have a course of radiotherapy. I was devastated.

I had just started to set up in business as a freelance copywriter. It seemed that every time I tried to get my life together, my health would step in and take over. Once more I felt out of control. However, my health problems once again encouraged me to maintain a

strong Buddhist practice. This was eventually to set me on a completely different career path.

I was admitted to a cancer hospital where I was to witness a death on the ward every week. Initially, it was a battle to maintain my practice as we were not allowed to draw the curtains around our beds unless a doctor was present. Eventually, I was given a special dispensation to do this in order to do gongyo. This was the perfect place to understand the eternity of life. It became important for me to honor the living, as well as the dying. So I and two other patients put a lot of energy into making the ward as positive a place to be as possible. We demanded improvements in the food, and me and a guy on the next ward used to sneak out to the local supermarket to get good food and treats for the other patients.

A visit from two dancers who came to perform for us opened my eyes. It was incredible how just watching them perform changed everyone's mood and gave us all a fresh determination to go on. For me, it demonstrated the importance of motivation and the need for a full life if one is to overcome an illness or disability. This inspired me to become an occupational therapist and as soon as I made a full recovery, I set about trying to find relevant work experience.

After leaving hospital, I was able to benefit from a convalescence at the European Buddhist Center at Trets in France. The day after my return, I was interviewed for and got a job as a part-time occupational therapy helper. My varied work experience and numerous battles with my health had finally paid off. This job enabled me to get the experience I required to go on and train. As part of my studies, I looked at the role of occupational therapy in cancer care. I was able to return to my cancer hospital to interview the new occupational therapist (there wasn't one when I was there). I discovered that not only had the food improved, but also that a faith healer had joined the team to cater for broader spiritual needs. I like to think that in some small way all my chanting behind the curtains paid off!

Once I qualified, I went to work on an acute psychiatric unit in Somerset where I was required to set up and run the occupational therapy service single-handedly. Starting the job coincided with ending a long-term relationship which, rather like my life up until that point, had been going nowhere for too long. The support I received from both Buddhist and non-Buddhist friends in the face of these rather daunting circumstances helped me to stop putting on an act and admit vulnerability. I learned to recognize my strengths and found the courage to move on without regrets. After passing my driving test at the sixth attempt, I gave up my job and moved to Florida.

There, I obtained work as a pediatric therapist. Despite covering five schools in a 40-mile radius, with a caseload of 70 children, I determined to see each child for half-an-hour every day. Against all the odds, I won. I know this was due to assiduous and regular Buddhist practice and nothing else. But it was not all work and no play. I did things I'd only ever dreamed of: I went down the Mississippi in a paddle-steamer, drove around New Orleans in a horse and carriage, zoomed through the Everglades on an airboat with a Mikasukee Indian and, best of all, drove across the American Deep South through the Smoky Mountains on my own. This was the girl who took a decade to pass her driving test, had never flown on a plane alone and had never been travelling because she couldn't find the right traveling companion.

By losing everything that I'd thought my life was based on—my home, my relationship—I suddenly had the freedom to take risks and discover who I truly was. Two

years of being single taught me to stand alone, like myself and embrace a wider variety of people. It was only when I realized I enjoyed being single that I met my present partner.

My life has now done a 360-degree turn. I live in the Yorkshire Pennines with someone who respects me and wants to be with me. My medical condition has been more thoroughly researched over the years, and I have attended a conference where I met many others with the same condition. There are many ways to heal a life but this practice is the one that has worked for me. I've proved to myself the truth of these words written by Nichiren Daishonin: "A woman who takes this efficacious medicine will be surrounded and protected by these four great bodhisattvas at all times. When she rises to her feet, so too will the bodhisattvas, and when she walks along the road, they will also do the same. She and they will be as inseparable as a body and its shadow, as fish and water, as a voice and its echo, or as the moon and its light.... How reassuring, how encouraging! Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 415).

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