

YOUTH STUDY SEPTEMBER 2000
TURNING TRAGEDY INTO FORTUNE, STRENGTH AND HAPPINESS
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Nothing, no matter what happens, can change your inherent worth. Please have courage. Please tell yourself that you are not going to let this ordeal defeat you — SGI President Ikeda (Feb. 25 *World Tribune*, p. 5).

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, somewhere in America, a woman is sexually assaulted every two minutes. The National Crime Victimization Survey states that between 1995 and 1996, more than 670,000 women were the victim of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).

I was horrified to learn of this high rate of violence against women, but five years ago, I became one of those statistics. I was sexually assaulted. It was truly the most terrifying experience of my life. The trauma of being sexually victimized caused guilt, shame and intense rage to grip my life. I had intense crying fits and emotional outbursts that left me feeling exhausted and the emotional aftershocks of violence made it difficult to get through my daily routine. Without knowing it, I suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. I could not shake the memories of what had happened.

For many women, being sexually violated causes them to retreat from their friends and fellow members and shut down parts of their lives. Some may try to counteract the feelings of being disrespected by being “tough” or “strong.” However, I have learned the hard way that these approaches of trying to get through life after being the victim of sexual violence are not healthy. Privately, I had beaten myself up for my lack of strength and lamented over my “horrible” karma that caused this situation to happen to me. Also, my fear and anger lead me to shun all social interactions. But instead of desperately projecting a false mask of toughness, I needed to open my heart.

Fortunately, I was able to confide in a young women’s leader who offered to do morning gongyo with me once a week for the next six months. Through our gongyo sessions, I began to see that the crucial moment had arrived. This experience brought me face to face with my fundamental darkness. I battled with my devils in front of the Gohonzon. It was unbelievably painful, but I was determined to change this poison that had been buried deep in my life once and for all.

Study became the driving force for maintaining my daimoku campaign. In his writing “Reply to the Lay Nun Myoho,” Nichiren Daishonin writes, “But now you, born a woman in the evil world of the latter age, while being reviled, struck, and persecuted by the barbaric inhabitants of this island country who are unaware of these things, have endured and are propagating the Lotus Sutra. The Buddha at Eagle Peak surely perceives that you surpass the nun [Mahaprajapati] as greatly as clouds do mud. The name of that nun, the Buddha Gladly Seen by All Living Beings, is no unrelated matter; it is now the name of the lay nun Myoho” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1106).

This was written to the lay nun Myoho and it describes the sincerity and dedication of Mahaprajapati, Shakyamuni’s aunt who was the first woman to enter the Buddhist order. At a time when women were taught that they could not reach

enlightenment because of their gender, Mahaprajapati became a great Buddha because of her strong commitment to the Lotus Sutra. After reading this, I was determined to model her commitment to face adversity in my own life and prove that in spite of it all, I could manifest my Buddhahood nature.

Earlier this year, SGI President Ikeda held a discussion with the high school division leaders of SGI-USA in which he addressed sexual violence against women. I was very excited to read his encouragement. I was deeply touched by his compassion because I know so many other young women have suffered tremendously from sexual violence. I knew his words could be a beacon of light for other survivors because they reminded me of the anguish I had felt and communicated the very essence of what I needed to hear.

President Ikeda also quoted Nichiren Daishonin who said, “Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo means to enter the palace of one’s own life” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 787). Every day we have an opportunity to enter “the palace of one’s life” through our practice of morning and evening gongyo and daimoku. This is a profound thing for a woman who may feel her very life has been defiled and all her joy of living and self-love has been taken away from her. By struggling to get up to chant every morning and by fighting to make my weekly gongyo session with my friend, I was able to solidify my perseverance to never give up. Our practice of this Buddhism gives us the opportunity to transform any experience, no matter how negative or discouraging, into a seed for growth. Through our efforts in faith, we connect to the power inherent in our own lives and thereby manifest the four virtues of eternity, happiness, true self and purity. All we have to do is find the courage, make a strong determination and continue on in the path of faith, and then all aspects of our lives will blossom like the beautiful lotus flower itself.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Discuss your reactions to this article.

Discuss how, in this essay, the study of Buddhism helped to develop a foundation of support in the darkest of moments.

Why is it important to have self-esteem? Have you had any struggles with your own sense of self-worth? How are you able to sustain a belief in your own inherent worth?

Discuss the importance for youth to grow and develop, and never deny the brilliance of their lives.

Have you participated in the Victory Over Violence activities? Can you discuss other ways in which Buddhism helps us to achieve a victory over the violence in our society and in our lives?