

SOKA SPIRIT BY TAMIE FRASIER, NEW JERSEY

I am 25 years old and have recently graduated from law school. Although I was born into this practice, I am always reluctant to call myself a “fortune baby,” because growing up in a Judeo-Christian society, I often felt embarrassed about my Eastern-based religious beliefs, and felt more intolerance than fortune with regard to practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

My legacy (which stems from my grandmother, Sarah Jordan, converting to Buddhism in 1968) is something, however, that I have learned to appreciate as the heart of my spiritual foundation. And in retrospect, my spiritual growth can be divided into three stages: being born into Buddhism, where a basic foundation was laid (which I jokingly refer to as *the era of forced fortune*); going to college, where I truly began to practice for myself; and going to law school, where I took leadership responsibilities and am now learning how to practice for others.

Growing up in a large family of practicing Buddhists was paradoxical, in that, I did not always like to do gongyo and activities, but I always found comfort in knowing that my problems could be overcome through chanting. Yet, this bitter-sweet dynamic drastically tilted toward the bitter side when my grandmother, whom everyone in both my family, as well as the SGI in Washington, D.C., warmly referred to as “Mama Lou,” died the summer before my senior year of high school.

My grandmother had successfully fought against an illness called scleroderma for many years, however, when she was nearing the end of her existence, as I knew her, I poured my life into chanting for her not to die. My grandmother and I were so close that when visiting her in the intensive care unit, I could literally feel when her life-condition was strong and when it was growing weaker. I can remember chanting with all of my heart, placing all the faith that I had into her survival.

Thus, when Mama Lou died, I was devastated. I could not understand how so much of my chanting could not save her, or even why someone who had dedicated her whole life to this Buddhism had to suffer. Consequently, I felt betrayed by the Gohonzon and rebelled by discontinuing my practice. While I would still chant when my parents called me for gongyo, I refused to have complete faith in the Gohonzon. For me, that would be rendering myself vulnerable to something that had hurt me much too badly to forgive.

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The following summer, I left early for school, and began my life as a college student at Hampton University in Hampton, Va. I did not take the Gohonzon, and actually viewed leaving for college as a way to escape having to do gongyo and participate in Buddhist activities.

My first year of college was one filled with experiences that taught me many things about myself mainly, that I liked to party, especially on my parent’s dime. My friends and I were notorious on the campus of Hampton University (and maybe even the surrounding city). We took full advantage of the newfound freedom of living away

from home, not having to go to class and discovering the many substances that could alter one's mind. Because of our "free-spiritedness," many of my friend's grades began to drop drastically. My grades, however, did not suffer to the same degree.

My sophomore year, I decided that I had hit rock bottom when my grades finally began to catch up with my actions, and after having a very emotional argument with my mother, I realized that I was in no way honoring my grandmother's memory, or my parent's sacrifices by acting out in such destructive ways. At that moment, I decided to take the Gohonzon back to school with me, and slowly but surely began practicing, not because my parents told me to, but because I was seeing what chanting was doing for my life.

As a result, two months after I took the Gohonzon to school with me, I was awarded an internship to work with the Foreign Service in Zimbabwe, Africa, a dream that I had had most of my life.

By the time I graduated from college, my grade point average had gone from a 2.5 as a sophomore, to a 3.8 as a graduating senior. I also began reading the Gosho (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*), the *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism*, as well as going to meetings; and through such activities, I began to understand that the Gohonzon—which Nichiren Daishonin inscribed for the happiness for all humanity—is not a magic wand, but rather a symbolic manifestation of his own and each individual's potential for Buddhahood, which is only as effective as the energy put into activating such a life-condition.

The summer of 1997, I moved to New Jersey for law school and, unlike college, immediately began to practice and participate in activities. It was not long before I found myself deeply connected to the members' lives and caring for each one as if he or she were close relatives, as I had done in Hampton.

It was at this time that the temple issue became a topic that I could no longer ignore. Initially, I resented the fact that the SGI continuously discussed the temple issue. To me, it was difficult enough to explain Buddhism to guests, let alone trying to discuss the division that had occurred between the priesthood and the laity. I felt that it was judgmental to denounce those who chose to go with the priest—after all, we were all chanting, and wasn't that the most important thing?

There were three events that changed my view of the SGI's concern with the priesthood. These events helped me to realize just how crucial our mission is, as members of the SGI, to propagate and correctly practice the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin.

The first event occurred my first year of law school. I was catching the subway in one of the busiest train stations in New York when I heard a man frantically asking passersby if they had heard of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I first was in shock, thinking, "I can't believe the SGI has begun to do 'street *shakubuku*' again!" That's how oblivious I was to the temple members' existence. But as I approached him, he handed me a pamphlet that explained about Buddhist temple meetings then being held in Queens.

For the first time I was forced to face the effects of the temple, and my heart sank. In contrast to the "stand against injustice" personality I thought I had, I wanted to run away. Yet I forced myself to speak. I asked the man how long he had been practicing, and he told me he had been practicing for 20 years. I then said to him,

“So you remember when the SGI wholeheartedly supported the temple and we practiced together?” and he looked at me as though he’d seen a ghost. Before I could continue, he hopped on the train and was gone in a flash. It seemed so surreal, but it was realistic enough for me to see that the glow that is usually so apparent in the faces of those who practice this Buddhism was no longer in his face; remnants of distortion and dependency stood in its place. I finally understood the need to talk about the injustice of the priests’ manipulation of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

The next incident occurred a year later while I was at home in Maryland during summer break. There was a huge movement to protest the destruction of the Sho-Hondo (Grand Main Temple) and I was asked to give an experience about my grandmother’s contributions to its construction.

Although my comfort in giving experiences compelled me to agree immediately, it was not until I talked to my mother and was told how my grandmother sacrificed to contribute financially that I became angry at what the temple was doing. It finally dawned on me: My grandmother was only one of thousands, perhaps millions, who “went without” so that the Dai-Gohonzon could rest in a place that was representative of all those who embraced it.

“Look at what they have to do to stop me!”

There was a part of me that mourned for the pioneers’ efforts. I did not know how to overcome that feeling of despair, until one day when I spoke with a women’s member just before I had to give my experience. She shared with me a similar experience she had when working on a sculpture. She told me how she had to create a sculpture paying homage to a defiant, enslaved pregnant woman. This woman had been lynched and her baby taken from her womb. She explained how she was overwhelmed by this horrendous act, but knew it was important to have the right life-condition during its creation because that would ultimately set the tone for how it was received.

She continued by saying that she chanted not to feel depressed while sculpting this woman, and that through digging deep within her own life, she realized that this woman was not a victim, but rather a martyr. Instead of dying as an enslaved pregnant woman, she died as a courageous warrior, who to the very end screamed with her life, “Look at what they have to do to stop me!”

I then realized that my grandmother, and the many other pioneer members, did not lose by the destruction of the Sho-Hondo. Rather, their spirit and courage live in our refusal to bow down to the injustice of the priesthood. Thus, from the destruction of the Sho-Hondo we can hear the shout from the pioneers to the priesthood, “Look at what you have to do, and you still can’t stop us!”

Finally, my understanding of the importance of the temple issue was solidified at a meeting I attended at the New York Culture Center this past year. Many leaders were gathered on a panel to give guidance. At this meeting, someone asked a question that I had often wondered, “Why must we always discuss the temple issue?” One of the leaders very slowly leaned close to the microphone and said with a quiet, yet firm voice, “What I am about to say may sound strict, but if you do not understand the urgency of the temple issue and the need to clarify the injustice that the priesthood is committing against this Buddhism, then you do not understand the

concept of practicing for others.” Just as simple as he had made that statement, it finally clicked for me.

While I had begun to understand the injustice of the temple through encountering the temple member in the subway and giving the experience about the Sho-Hondo, only at that moment did I finally understand the broader picture. This Buddhism is twofold: practicing for oneself; and practicing for others. I now understand that we cannot sit idly watching temple members practice Buddhism in such a distorted way and not do something to stand against injustice. I realized this is not being judgmental; this is being compassionate and doing whatever you can to keep them from slandering their lives.

So my fight against injustice continues every day, especially as the New Jersey Region student division leader. I believe in my heart that we each have a role to play in ending the injustice that the priesthood continues to commit. As a member of the student division, I take great comfort in knowing that it is our legacy as students to study and understand the purpose of the Daishonin’s Buddhism. In doing so, we can become true soldiers for kosen-rufu.

I would like to end by expressing my deepest appreciation to SGI President Ikeda for spreading this Buddhism throughout the world. I recently wrote him for the first time, explaining my family’s history with this practice, and also explaining that I never really understood the mentor–disciple relationship. He responded by simply saying that he was chanting for my grandmother. I was so touched because he was able to say exactly what I needed to hear to reconcile the difficulties I have had with my grandmother’s passing. I sincerely believe there is nothing more sacred that I can do in honor of her memory than fighting for kosen-rufu alongside President Ikeda, our mentor in faith.