

## **MAKING THIS PRACTICE MY OWN BY SOPHIE CHEN, ORANGE COUNTY, CALIF.**

I was introduced to Buddhism by my mother, who has been practicing now for 15 years. I followed her out of obedience but never understood why I was practicing. I never inquired into Buddhism, neither studying nor deepening my understanding. My practice was empty—I did not believe in chanting until I started practicing seriously this past year. I only believed in tangible things, and faith is one of those things that couldn't be seen or touched. I always knew I had determination to accomplish what I wanted in life, but I was never set on changing myself from within.

I would get encouragement and advice from friends when I was desperate, but after the conversation ended, I would revert back to my old habits again. Yet, now my life seems to have made a 180-degree turn.

At one point, I was so fatigued by the vicious cycles of my negative relationships. I did not know how to put a halt to this cycle. People always quoted from great proverbs, but nobody could explain exactly how to live those wise sayings. Then something occurred to me—I should try to chant sincerely to the Gohonzon, this time with strong conviction and genuine faith. I began actively participating in SGI events, starting with the Victory Over Violence campaign this past June.

The main turning point came when I determined to go to the Florida Nature and Culture Center this year. I attended the student division conference in August, and that became the pivotal moment for me with this practice. During my visit at the FNCC, I was faced with the depth of my fundamental darkness. It was lurking in me and I was in disbelief because I was in the most positive environment possible with the most positive young people. My observations were always about others, never on myself because it was always easier to reproach others than to have the courage to reflect on my behavior and admit that change begins with me. I learned that my environment is only a manifestation of my life-condition. Because I was so negative in my attitude, that is what I projected outwardly. It had nothing to do with the environment that I was in. I was so touched seeing each and every one of those students embracing their struggle, not judging themselves for it. Their energy was magnetic. I have never been exposed to such encouraging people. Even faced with severe problems, each still emerged with a positive attitude on life. I realized, that is the faith they have gained in themselves—having courage to never be defeated by their obstacles. The whole experience did not even penetrate or impact me until I came back home.

I gained a whole new perspective on my life and what it means to have faith in myself. I also learned about the significance of conviction. I was so invigorated and rejuvenated when I came back from the conference. I made the determination to do consistent gongyo and daimoku, as well as become even more active in SGI activities. Now, I understand what Nichiren Daishonin meant when he wrote “never seek this law outside of yourself.” I now have the courage and the faith in myself that I will overcome and surmount whatever challenges I am faced with because I have gained confidence and security within my own life.