

**PERSPECTIVE
BECOMING HAPPY, NOT PERFECT
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Susan McDonough shares her challenge to believe in herself and become happy — not perfect.

Until recently, I never paid much attention to the idea of valuing myself. I've experimented. I've chanted on occasion to love myself and silently repeated positive affirmations, but when it came to revolutionizing my chronic self-doubt, it always felt too difficult or unnecessary. Besides, I was attached to my self-deprecating ways.

Like anything, not believing in myself had its up sides, too. I always thought it made me sensitive, affable and funny. Undermining myself was my way of getting along with people, and the thought of changing was scary.

Recently, however, various things have forced me to reexamine the way I view myself. And through chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, I've had profound insights that I don't think I'd be capable of without my Buddhist practice.

At the end of last year, I began noticing that I sometimes dreaded interacting individually with people, especially people that I didn't know very well. This was particularly evident at SGI-USA meetings. While everybody else seemed to enjoy engaging in casual conversations after the meetings, I had to fight the urge to bolt. I could be friendly and engaging on the surface, but inside I was often in anguish. I realized it was because I felt consumed by whomever was speaking to me. My need for approval took precedence over just being myself. As a result, talking with people was not enjoyable.

Further evidence that something was amiss in the depths of my life came in December. After 14 years of Buddhist practice, I'd changed some of the deepest sources of frustration in my life: I work as a journalist, something that until a few years ago felt impossible. I have an amazing boyfriend whom I managed to meet despite the fact that we lived in cities 3,000 miles apart. And I moved from Buffalo, N.Y., to the San Francisco Bay Area — another lifelong dream. Yet, despite my victories, I still felt plagued by a low-grade unhappiness. No longer able to blame it on my environment, I realized I needed to dig in deeply and get to the source of my feelings.

While chanting with other youth at the East Bay Community Center, I had another significant realization: When I'm in front of the Gohonzon, my underlying prayer is often to be someone else, usually a conglomerate of all the women — real, fictional or imagined — that I've ever admired.

There's a subtle difference between being inspired by others to develop certain areas of your life, and praying unrealistically to be like someone you perceive as perfect or better. One leaves me feeling restored and joyful while the other leaves me vaguely frustrated.

In *Faith into Action*, SGI President Ikeda writes: "While controlling your mind, which is at once both extremely subtle and solemnly profound, you should strive to elevate your faith with freshness and vigor. When you do so, both your life and surroundings will open wide before you, and every action you take will become a source of benefit. Understanding the subtle workings of one's mind is the key to faith and to attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime" (p. 96).

The idea of controlling the subtle workings of my mind used to scare me. It seemed too difficult to change the way I thought. It was as if I had to “rewire” myself. What’s so encouraging is that my Buddhist practice naturally led me to a place where I could consciously work on valuing myself. To me this is proof that through our strong practice, each of us possesses the innate wisdom to become happy. In spite of the subtle distortions of our minds, if we practice consistently our lives lead us to happiness— even if you’re a chronic self-doubter, like me. I also realized that understanding the “subtle workings of one’s mind” means refining aspects of our lives, not changing ourselves entirely. The idea of valuing myself these days seems less intimidating because it’s coming from my life and not because it’s the “right thing” to do.

President Ikeda also says: “Those who advance together with this organization dedicated to kosen-rufu will evolve the correct mind of faith that matches the time. With this mind of faith, you can fill the canvas of your lives with portraits of happiness in which all your wishes are fulfilled” (*Faith into Action*, p. 138).

It’s a new century, a new era, and I’m so encouraged that my life is responding naturally to my mentor President Ikeda’s wish for the success and happiness of the SGI-USA members. He’s called this the Century of Women and I’m determined to greet it unburdened with outdated and ineffective ways of viewing myself. My life must be in perfect rhythm.