

EXPERIENCE—STEPHEN SHAYE ELLIOT, LAS VEGAS A CHANGE IN HIS FUTURE BEGAN WITH A CHANGE WITHIN

The prospect of years behind bars led Shaye Elliot to begin his Buddhist practice and see things around him differently.

California has a “three strikes law,” which makes someone with two previous serious felony convictions subject to life in prison for any new felony conviction. Simple possession of illicit narcotics is a felony punishable up to three years in a state penitentiary. The battle I have faced with substance abuse, which began with IV drug use at the age of 14, has withstood long stays in prison and the destruction of every relationship I have ever had. Until June 2000, I had skirted the laws against illegal drug use and possession and managed to incur only parole violations after serving a five-year sentence.

Last year, the law finally caught up with me. It could not have been a worse time. My girlfriend, Julie, my 1-month old son, Ryan, and I were living in a hotel room, really a studio apartment. We were trying to start life afresh in our new “home.” One Friday night around 11:30, we were caught in a raid. The Parole Enforcement Team found seven pills and a small amount of methamphetamines. Julie and I were arrested and Ryan was shuttled off to family members. I was told at my first court date that I would be facing a life sentence in prison. Julie, also with prior convictions, now faced seven years. Our son had lost both of his parents in the course of an hour.

At 30, my life seemed to be ending with several appearances in front of the judge. I had always thought that my drug addiction was not anyone’s problem but my own. I resented the implication by others that when I chose to use drugs I was victimizing those closest to me. I now saw the truth of this. Julie was in jail, my son was gone, and my parents and family could only watch as I was locked away. Maybe forever. All because I had abused drugs.

The pain was indescribable. Suicide, depression and self-loathing are the only words I can think of to give a glimpse into my life-condition in the first few days of my arrest. The worst part of the whole ordeal were the thoughts of never being able to hold my beautiful son again, and that I had ruined Julie’s life.

The first week of my incarceration, my father came down to the jail to visit. He has been practicing Buddhism for 30 years—as long as I have been alive—and he has always shared his feelings about the power of Buddhist practice with me. But I had always declined to practice. Through the course of our hour-long visit, my father let me know in no uncertain terms that if I started chanting, I would not get life in prison. “Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is not an intellectual exercise,” he said. “Just chant and you will receive results.”

I followed my father’s suggestion, and with the encouragement of my mother and others, I started practicing. I chanted, studied and even shared the practice with some of the other inmates.

The machinations of the criminal justice system were not foreign to me. I knew I needed adequate representation and a sense of calm. These were the first things I chanted for and received: the best criminal defense lawyer in the courthouse—free of charge—and I was

able to keep my head relatively straight. Three months into the labyrinth of court appearances and county jail, my lawyer managed to convince the district attorney that a probation report was in order. This report would be my one (and probably my only) chance to avoid a 25-year sentence. An officer of the court would review my life and an interview would be conducted.

As I prayed about this situation, I noticed a change. My concern was not only for a successful interview, but for Julie and my son, who was not even a year old. All of our futures were intertwined and I knew that my less-than-compassionate attitude of before would not serve me now. The only way that I could change this situation was through sincere and genuine prayer.

There is a section of the 4th prayer of gongyo that addresses expiating negative karma. I had hurt others in the past and knew there was a lot of negative causes I had to make amends with. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is the only philosophy I have found that lets one overcome obstacles — past, present and future. With this practice, one has the power to begin anew. It is a power, undeniable, and I had the fortune to tap it.

In preparation for the interview, I found out that the court officer would basically be working on my behalf and for the state. My attorney told me that during the interview I should be completely open and honest. Being up front with authority figures in the system was not something I was used to doing, but I trusted my attorney, and I decided to give it a shot. All of my trust and arrogance issues had gotten me nowhere thus far, so I chanted to do what I had to do.

The interview could not have gone better. I was open and honest, and the court officer was interested in what I had to say. Afterwards, another court date was scheduled for two weeks later, and I would then know my fate. I had become so fatalistic after nine or 10 dealings with the courts that I was actually chanting for an eight-year sentence — which was as lenient a sentence as I realistically expected to receive. The outcome was more than I could have imagined: I was given time served and released. No parole, no probation. Julie was sentenced to a rehabilitation facility with my son. For the first time in a long time, a positive future was unfolding in front of me.

I found out later that my mother would stay home all day, for days on end, chanting for her grandson, her future daughter-in-law, and me. She would chant incessantly that we would be reunited. And we were.

I am now living in Las Vegas, clean and sober and with a steady job. Julie is living with Ryan in California in a rehabilitation center and we're working on repairing our relationship.

I believe my victory was in large part due to a change within, something that only this practice could allow me to do. Every day I confront this realization and my future in front of the Gohonzon.

I have no deep philosophical understanding of how or why Nam-myoho-renge-kyo helped me to reclaim my life. I simply know that it did.