

EXPERIENCE—SANJAY GAUR, LOS ANGELES CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES IN FRONT OF ME

Sanjay Gaur uses his Buddhist practice to confront his dyslexia and fear of failure as he works for solutions to global environmental problems.

When I was in high school, I had the fortune to be an exchange student to Malaysia for a summer. I was already practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and very much looking forward to the experience of living abroad.

On one of our excursions, we were taken to an oyster farm where we could also view other wildlife. At one point we saw a group of monkeys in a grove of trees. The sight was rather astonishing. Not so much because of the monkeys or the trees, but because of the foot of garbage that lay beneath the trees. Trash that had been thrown into the river close by had collected and was literally piling up under the trees. It was then and there I realized that I wanted to help solve environmental problems throughout the world. Wherever there were people, there would be problems, and I was going to help.

With a new sense of mission, I applied and was accepted to the University of California at Santa Cruz, where I studied environmental issues. It was at this point that I also become more involved in SGI activities, specifically by helping a fellow student with his Buddhist practice.

One day, the student, who happened to be dyslexic, suggested that since I had difficulties reading out loud, I might be dyslexic as well. I ignored his suggestions and went on with life as usual.

We continued to get together to chant every week, and each time he would suggest that I might be dyslexic. I began to research how much it would cost to get tested for dyslexia. The test would cost \$800. I couldn't afford it, so I dismissed the issue.

In my second year of college, I became eligible to pursue both my bachelor's degree (in environmental studies) and master's degree (in economics) in a five-year program. But in order to qualify, I would have to take 20 units a quarter for a year, including the summertime.

During this period, I also began to take SGI President Ikeda's guidance to heart. I would read it as if he was writing me a personal letter. In one guidance, he wrote, "I have never made a cowardly compromise." At that moment, I realized that I would be making a cowardly compromise if I did not accept the challenges in front of me. Not only would I need to attack my studies as never before, I needed to get tested for dyslexia.

During my very last quarter, I found a facility where I could test for dyslexia free of charge. Six weeks before receiving two degrees from college, I was diagnosed with dyslexia. I knew college had been difficult, but now I understood why.

After successfully graduating—dyslexia and all—I joined the United States Peace Corps. I was stationed in Bulgaria, where I met my wife, Tatiana Koleva, whom I introduced to Buddhism.

Once I returned to the United States, I was charged up and ready to do some work on environmental policy. Soon I was offered a position for one of the largest water utility organizations in the world. I would be working in a department that was doing cutting edge work on the economics of water. After two months on the job, though, I realized that I was only hired to increase an already excessive empire of employees. I faxed, I copied,

but I did not do much more than that. I was a prisoner in a cubicle.

As I chanted about my situation, I realized that I might not be able create a lot of value at my job, but I could create value by participating in SGI activities. This is when I started to take active responsibility for one of the local SGI-USA community centers. I treated it with the same respect I would my home.

Within a month I found a new job that doubled my salary, allowed me to work at home and came with a boss who continually encouraged me to challenge myself. However, the desire to do the kind of environmental work that could influence society on a grand scale continued to nag at me. I knew that in order for me to have that kind of job, I would need an additional degree from a top university.

The problem was, this meant applying to graduate school—something I was not looking forward to. I feared the numerous rejections that might follow as a result of my learning disability. However, I remembered President Ikeda’s guidance about never making a cowardly compromise. Again, the challenge was in front of me. I started to study for the graduate record exam.

I needed high marks to get into the top schools with this exam, and I knew that this would not be easy. When I got my results, I was crushed. I only scored in the 70th percentile. I felt the future looked bleak.

When my wife asked me how I did, I told her that I would not be applying to graduate school. Up to this point, we had agreed that we would both apply to graduate school, and I was particularly insistent in my encouragement to her. My wife then informed me that if she had to apply, so did I. Even though I felt defeated, I swallowed my pride and applied.

I applied only to the top schools that would address environmental problems. As I chanted for a successful outcome, I also began to chant to find out why I am dyslexic. I realized that with my learning disability, I had to check and recheck everything I read and wrote. When you are constantly second guessing yourself, humility sets in. If not for the dyslexia, perhaps I would have become a very arrogant person. I started to chant with appreciation for this obstacle.

I began receiving rejection letters one after another. But after all, I was accepted to a school that seemed somewhat out of reach: The Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. I also received a \$10,000 scholarship for each year. Above and beyond my own expectations, I am starting in the fall. (My wife was accepted to law school at the University of California at Hastings and will begin the next school year.)

This experience has taught me that through faith in the Gohonzon, anyone can fulfill their dreams. The question is how willing one is to win over themselves and help others become happy.

President Ikeda once wrote: “There may be times when others seem enviable. But others are others and you are you. Rather than comparing your every joy and sorrow to that of others, you should aim to surpass your limits in the situation you currently find yourself in” (*A Conversation With Youth*, p. 34). It would be very easy for me to avoid the challenges that have arisen in my life because of my dyslexia. But if I did, I would not be living in the spirit of the practice, nor would I be living true to myself.

My determination is to continue to pursue my studies with even stronger drive, and one day become an advisor to the president on environmental issues.

I was able to achieve some of my goals before I was aware of my dyslexia, and there is no reason now to allow it to prevent me from achieving my dreams. The challenges that come will not deter me, only spur me to further growth.