

EXPERIENCE—RICHARD PEREZ, NORTH BERGEN, N.J. A HERO'S PASSION FOR PEACE

World Trade Center rescue worker Richard Perez declares that everyone who takes action for peace deserves to be called a hero.

I started practicing Buddhism four years ago. My wife introduced me to the SGI while we were dating. Without a doubt, she is the best thing that ever happened to me. Before I met her, I was not religious. I meditated, but really didn't have any kind of practice.

One day she asked if she could chant while I meditated. When she chanted, it sounded like a beautiful bird singing. She asked me to sit next to her while she chanted. Then she asked if I would like to try chanting, which I did. Well, from that moment I was hooked.

Since I started chanting, the practice has helped me tremendously, especially when faced with problems. I never had the courage to go for the things I wanted in life until I started practicing Buddhism. So many benefits came into my life; I got engaged, bought a home and started a family. Today, I am the young men's leader in a wonderful district in New Jersey.

Buddhism also awakened in me a powerful desire to help others, save lives and learn about safety. I work for the New York City Department of Transportation as a staff inspector for the borough of Manhattan. I am what is known as a "Peace Officer," because, although I'm a law enforcement officer like a policeman, I do not carry a gun. The main function of my job is to inspect public areas, before a festival or marathon for example, to make sure everything is secured and safe.

About a month ago, I began to feel a powerful urge to study and learn more about Buddhism. I carried *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* to and from work everyday and tried to read at least one paragraph a day. I began reading the *World Tribune* and SGI President Ikeda's encouragement on a consistent basis. Also, during my lunch hour, I would walk to the New York Culture Center to chant daimoku. I joked with the staff that I was having a "daimoku lunch."

On Sept. 11, I was not far away from the World Trade Center when the first plane hit. I was on the Staten Island ferry crossing the Hudson River. During my years of studying CPR and other safety training, I always wondered why I had to learn so much. Now I was given a chance to apply everything I learned. I really feel I was meant to be working near the World Trade Center at this time. In my mind, it is no coincidence.

When I got off the ferry, my co-workers and I began running toward the towers. As I got closer, I saw a man lying on the ground. I approached him and discovered he was having a heart attack. In fact, he was on his way to his heart doctor for a check-up. His name was Joseph.

I spent a lot of time helping Joseph, and eventually was able to get a police car to take him to an uptown hospital. As we were lifting him into the car, the first tower collapsed. In seconds, we were covered in dust and ashes. If it were not for Joseph—if I had not stopped to help him—I would have been under the tower when it fell.

I have been working at Ground Zero ever since. I won't go into details about what I have seen. In a sense, that is not what is most important. One thing I have come to realize through this whole ordeal is that there are two kinds of very strong emotions: anger and

compassion. Each time I went home in the evening after working on the site, I encountered people who were very angry about what happened. But those of us working at Ground Zero, the firemen and other rescue mission units, are not motivated by anger. We are motivated by a much more powerful emotion: compassion. We see every day, close up, the destruction that results from anger. Everyone looks at us like heroes, but I believe anyone who takes action to create a more peaceful world deserves to be called a hero.

I have also been able to draw abundant strength from Ni-chiren Daishonin's writing, "Great Evil and Great Good." The Daishonin's words keep going through my mind during this whole period: "Great events never have minor omens. When great evil occurs, great good follows. Since great slander already exists in our land, the great correct Law will spread without fail. What could any of you have to lament?" (WND, 1119).

I feel so much appreciation for everything and everyone I have in my life. I am fortunate to have a family and people whom I love who surround me. But the people working on the bucket line, removing debris, are also my family. We don't know each other's names, but we communicate with our eyes. It does not matter what culture we are from, what ethnic group we belong to; we are all working as one. We are constantly helping each other, constantly greeting one another. Each time someone is tired, another person jumps up to help. This is the way I feel the world should be. Sometimes it takes an obstacle for everyone to unite, for everyone to understand how precious life is.

Right now there is a co-worker on the site I want to tell about my Buddhist practice. It may take some time, but I am going to share my faith with him.

Through this experience, I am determined to develop myself as a human being and help others as much as I can. I want to keep fighting for kosen-rufu. And I want to thank everyone for every single daimoku chanted for world peace and unity. My conviction now is to speak to everyone I can about Buddhism whenever I get the opportunity; to share Buddhist philosophy and instill in others a desire for peace. I believe this is the time to unite not just the country, but the entire world. It is our mission, right now, to establish world peace.

*—As told to Sean Grover,
New York correspondent*