

Buddhism



by
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I met my best friend Rose during my junior year of high school when she transferred from a private high school in the area and joined our cross-country team. I don't know how we became such close friends so quickly, except that we enjoyed each other's company and made each other laugh. Rose was extremely beautiful, very friendly, incredibly funny, and loves to talk to people and make new friends. She was my complete opposite. We spent time with our friend Lilly in between classes and ran on the cross-country team together with four or five other girls who subjected themselves to the same daily physical punishment that we did. Not long after we met, Rose shared with me her Buddhist philosophy – a philosophy that I came to believe in, and which ultimately played a crucial role in my ability to overcome my illness. I might never have learned about Buddhism without Rose's friendship.

Initially, I was attracted to Buddhism because of Rose and our friendship. We chanted together in her room at her parent's house in Sunnyvale and went to Buddhist meetings together. When I first started practicing Buddhism, I was initially drawn to the Gohonzon but it was also much more than that. I learned about this Buddhism from my best friend Rose at the time, and my interest in Buddhism also had a lot to do with our friendship and how I felt about Rose. In Rose I saw a beautiful, friendly, warm, mysterious, exotic and unique individual. We quickly became very close friends and we spent much of our time together. We were completely the opposite in terms of personality. She was outgoing and vivacious and could talk to anyone about anything. I was reserved and shy, and rarely talked to anyone, even my own family. We made a good team this way. After I graduated from college, I left for the Peace Corps and we grew apart. Over the years, my own Buddhist practice grew stronger. I studied more, read more and learned more about the teachings. This is what has kept me practicing for the past 25 years. I believed in what I was practicing, and I never stopped believing in it.

Shortly after Rose and I became friends, she invited me to my first Buddhist meeting. She told me that she had been raised Catholic, but she had a friend who had told her about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism¹ a few years ago. Rose started practicing Buddhism when she was 15. Looking back, 15 is a young age to start making independent decisions about which religion you are going to practice. I didn't think anything of it at the time, at least not until I told my parents I wanted to start practicing Buddhism too. Before long, I started accompanying Rose to local Buddhist meetings, and the first time I chanted my Buddhist chant was with Rose one fall afternoon after cross-country practice. I drove us to her parents' house from school, and since no one else was home, we walked down the hallway into her bedroom to chant.

The sun was beginning to set and the sky started to darken outside Rose's bedroom window. As we walked into her room, Rose flipped on the ceiling light and the bedroom she shared with her younger sister glowed a warm, comfortable yellow. I looked around and saw Rose's altar in one corner of her room near the doorway. Rose had a small, square, black and white marble table directly beneath her butsudan². The dark maroon-colored butsudan was fastened to the wall about three feet above the marble table-top. I saw two white candles, a small rectangular dish with ash for burning incense, a black, plastic water cup, and a small vase with a few green plant clippings in it. We sat down cross-legged on the floor next to each other. Rose lit the candles with a match and briefly stuck a fragrant, black incense stick into one of the bright yellow flames until the tip caught and burned bright orange. A smoky, perfumed scent calmed me and thin tendrils of smoke curled into the air as she pressed the incense stick softly

¹ After Shakyamuni's passing, his teachings became splintered and increasingly misunderstood as they spread throughout Asia and beyond. In the 13th century, a Japanese Buddhist reformer, Nichiren Daishonin, declared the Lotus Sutra taught during the final eight years of Shakyamuni's (also known as Siddhartha) life, to be the highest and ultimate teaching of Buddhism.

² Literally "house of the Buddha". The Gohonzon is enshrined in a butsudan.

into its own ash. At that instant, I fell in love with incense. I gazed up at the butsudan as Rose solemnly opened its two small doors outward. Since it was the first time I had ever chanted, I turned to Rose and asked softly, “Should I close my eyes?” I wasn't sure if I was supposed to look at what was inside her butsudan. Rose smiled at me warmly and shook her head, “Focus on the Gohonzon³,” and I saw a paper scroll hanging inside the butsudan once she opened the small wooden doors.

In Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, the Gohonzon represents our own life. The Chinese and Sanskrit characters written on the scroll are a reflection of our lives and everything our lives encompass, particularly our Buddha nature. When we open the doors to the butsudan and pray to the Gohonzon, we are opening the doors to our own life. That afternoon was the first time in my life I chanted Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo⁴. We started slow at first because I didn't know how to pronounce the chant. Rose started off with her strong, lyrical voice and I accompanied her more quietly, hesitant and uncertain. Eventually our voices blended together, and we found rhythm and harmony that fall evening chanting side by side on her bedroom floor. Rose and I chanted together for an entire hour, and she was so proud of me, she bragged about my first hour chanting with her at Buddhist meetings for months to come.

Prior to chanting and learning about Buddhism, I had spent time reading about other philosophies in my search for a teaching that made sense. I read about New Age spirituality and the power of crystals, other types of Buddhism including Zen, and a little bit about astrology. Nothing ever made sense. When I read about other Buddhist sects, the ideas and

³ The Gohonzon, or “object of devotion” or “object of fundamental respect” is a scroll comprised of both Chinese and Sanskrit characters with the words Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo written down the middle.

⁴ Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo means literally “devotion to the Mystic Law of cause and effect through sound and vibration”. Myoho Renge Kyo is the title of the Lotus Sutra in its Japanese translation. Nichiren Daishonin (the founder of this Buddhism) believed that the Lotus Sutra contains the ultimate truth of Buddhism: that everyone without exception has the potential to attain Buddhahood.

concepts were unclear. In Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, the concepts, although not easy to grasp, made perfect sense at the deepest level of my life. Looking back, I realize that I was attracted to the Gohonzon even when I knew very little about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I enjoyed going to Buddhist meetings with Rose because we were close friends and we had fun together. I met many people at meetings who shared their stories about the tremendous obstacles and illnesses they had overcome with their Buddhist practice. One man survived cancer, a young woman in San Francisco battled leukemia, and another woman's family prayed for her recovery from anorexia.

I perceived Buddhism as deep, profound and mysterious. The teachings aren't intended to be a mystery, but I was moved by the profundity of what I read, especially when I was in high school. I also loved the altar - the smell of the incense, the bright yellow glow of the candles, the bell ringing sonorously after each silent prayer - it had the perfect sort of exoticism. The teachings were endless, and there was always something new to learn. Although the introductory guide, *Fundamentals of Buddhism*⁵ states, "There are a bewildering array of Buddhist teachings, which are often referred to as the "eighty thousand teachings." However, the purpose of all Buddhist teachings is to enable human beings to overcome suffering and achieve happiness⁶. The teachings are not meant to confuse people, only to help us understand ourselves and live happier lives. I've always considered myself a Buddhist first and foremost before anything else.

⁵ *Fundamentals of Buddhism*. Kirimura, Yasuji. 1977. Nichiren Shoshu International Center. Japan.

⁶ *Basics of Buddhism*. Allwright, Pat. 1998. Taplow Press (SGI-UK). United Kingdom.

Not long after I started chanting with Rose, I bought a few books from the bookstore at the local SGI Buddhist center in San Jose and started reading about Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. I subscribed to the SGI weekly and monthly publications⁸, both of which offered personal experiences, encouragement from Daisaku Ikeda, president of the Soka Gakkai International, and in-depth explanations of Buddhist concepts. In the evenings I read in bed. My favorite study material was from a letter⁹ titled "On Attaining Buddhahood"¹⁰, written by the founder of this Buddhism, Nichiren Daishonin.

What then does myo signify? It is simply the mysterious nature of our life from moment, which the mind cannot comprehend or words express. When we look into our own mind at any moment, we perceive neither color nor form to verify that it exists. Yet we still cannot say it does not exist, for many differing thoughts continually occur. The mind cannot be considered either to exist or not to exist. Life is indeed an elusive reality that transcends both the words and concepts of existence and nonexistence. It is neither existence nor nonexistence, yet exhibits the qualities of both. It is the mystic entity of the Middle Way that is the ultimate reality. Myo is the name given to the mystic nature of life, and ho, to its manifestations. Renge, which means lotus flower, is used to symbolize the wonder of this Law. If we understand that our life at this moment is myo, then we will also understand that our life at other moments is the Mystic Law. This realization is the mystic kyo, or sutra. The Lotus Sutra is the king of sutras, the direct path to enlightenment, for it explains that the entity of

⁷ Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is the current name of the lay Buddhist organization (Soka Gakkai) originally founded by its first president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi in Japan in 1930. It is the philosophy taught by Nichiren Daishonin that forms the foundation of the SGI. Soka Gakkai translated from the Japanese means "value-creating society." More information can be found online at www.sgi.org and www.sgi-usa.org.

⁸ *World Tribune* and *Living Buddhism* respectively.

⁹ The letter refers to *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*. These writings are a compilation of letters and treatises written by Nichiren himself to his followers. These letters and treatises, more than 400 of which remain today, are collected in English as *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vols. I and II, and are the primary study material for SGI members. Search *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* online: <http://www.sgilibrary.org>. (<http://www.sgi-usa.org/studyandpubs/writingsofnd.php>)

¹⁰ http://www.sgilibrary.org/pdf/001_0003.pdf#page=1

our life, which manifests either good or evil at each moment, is in fact the entity of the Mystic Law.

Our Buddhist chant, Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, had such incredible meaning. The more I thought about it, the more I believed what I read. Life really was an “elusive reality”, and I believed that everything known and unknown – all the people and animals, the trees and mountains, the city street buses (I used to contemplate this idea while looking out the window of the bus riding home from class at UC Santa Cruz), the white cement of our sidewalks, houses, every building, the blue sky and the sun, the planets and the stars, and everything in all the oceans – was a manifestation of this Mystic Law. The more I read about Buddhism, the more I liked the philosophy.

I had stopped attending weekly Sunday church services with my parents a few years ago when I started high school. There wasn't anything in particular about my parents' church that I disliked, I just found the worship services boring, and could never relate to the teachings. Nothing the Presbyterian church taught made sense to me. The idea of God was strange. Whenever I pictured God, I had an image in my head of a tall, old white man with a long white beard, wearing long flowing white robes, and carrying a gold cane. I have no idea where this image came from. I asked myself, “Why is God a white man? Why isn't God a black woman? Where does he live? How could he have possibly created every single thing on Earth, in addition to our solar system, the galaxy, and the rest of the known universe in one week?” I never discovered the answers to these questions, and a year and a half after the day I first chanted with Rose, I started practicing Buddhism wholeheartedly, gave up on the idea of God, and never looked back.

At the time, I never imagined that over twenty years later, the intriguing and profound Buddhist philosophy that I had adopted as a

teenager would become my guiding light and enable me to illuminate even the darkest despair in my life with the light of hope.