The Flame of My Vow

Living Buddhism: Thank you for sharing your experience with us. Tell us about your upbringing.

Mary Yao: I grew up in New York City’s Chinatown. My parents had immigrated to America in 1984 from China, because they wanted my brother and me to have a better life. In reality, my father worked 15-hour shifts as a chef, and we rarely saw him. There was even a period for several years when he worked in Philadelphia, and he wouldn’t come home for months at a time. He was a stranger to us.

Needless to say, our finances were tight. At times, we were forced to rent out one of the two bedrooms in our apartment. Growing up this way, I didn’t want to be a burden to my parents, so I began working in high school and took out student loans to attend college. My dream was to one day have a good job in finance so that I could support them.

How were you introduced to the SGI?

Mary: When I graduated from college, I applied to many finance positions but received no responses. I couldn’t face any more rejection so I stopped applying for jobs in my field. Instead, I worked odd jobs, which included temping on a demolition site for minimum wage. I was feeling hopeless. I was trying so hard, but just couldn’t transform my family’s financial situation. In addition, I felt that there must be more to life, but I didn’t know how to find it. That’s when my college friend introduced me to the SGI.

How did chanting change your perspective?

Mary: Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo gave me hope and a new perspective on my struggles. Almost every day after work, I went to the SGI-USA New York Culture Center with my friend and chanted for five minutes. I gained the courage to apply for a job that I had been looking at for a while, but was too afraid to apply for, thinking I would receive another rejection. They called me in for an interview, and I got the job!
I was excited to enter the financial world and begin paying off my student loans. But my job turned out to be difficult. I felt intimidated and agonized over every mistake. In the past, I would have run away at the first signs of adversity, but this time, I decided to face my struggles with my Buddhist practice and transform my circumstances.

I made every cause I could, chanting, studying and participating in SGI activities. Around this time, my sponsor also spoke to me about the significance of making financial offerings in Buddhism. I was touched by her own appreciation for the practice and her desire to contribute, even though she was struggling financially. Through her example, I learned that contributing to the SGI is not a charitable act or something you do when you have money. Rather, it is a pledge to support the organization that is spreading this wonderful philosophy that teaches the dignity of life. It is an expression of my vow. I began participating in the May Commemorative Contribution Activity my first year of practice and have since become a sustaining contributor.

What was your turning point in your Buddhist practice?

Mary: My parents couldn’t speak English, and I resented having to do things for them that were beyond the scope of my capacity at a young age,
such as acting as their translator and filing official documents for them. I also struggled with my identity and rejected my Chinese culture.

When I joined the Byakuren Group, a young women’s training group, I learned to support and assist members behind the scenes, which brought out my compassion for humanity and helped train me to chant deeply for others. In the process, I realized that I was fighting for peace in society but didn’t actively work to create it at home.

I didn’t treat my family with the same care that I extended to the members. And, although I wanted to help support my parents financially, I never thought about what it would take to create a happy, harmonious family. In my culture, we don’t tend to express our feelings, and my parents and I have a language barrier. But I began chanting to show them that I loved them.

How did things change from that point?

Mary: Over time, I gained the courage to talk with my parents more often and show them that I cared about them. This was definitely a result of my human revolution. My family saw the changes in me. Three years after I began practicing, my mother received the Gohonzon. While she was always a wonderful person, she has become warmer and more compassionate. She has also introduced many people to the SGI. Through practicing together, we completely transformed our family dynamic, and make it a point to spend time together.

Today, my mom feels that it’s her mission to share Buddhism with other immigrant parents who struggle with raising their children in the U.S. She wants to give them the tools to create harmonious relationships through their Buddhist practice.
My responsibility in Byakuren and as a young women's leader also helped me learn how to respond effectively and compassionately to people and to handle challenging situations. When faced with adversity, I tended to doubt myself. Through my efforts to encourage other young women, I saw that I don’t need to be someone I’m not. I am fine just the way that I am.

**Mary:** Through my practice, I learned that kosen-rufu is a flow rather than an endpoint. Therefore, contributing financially to the SGI is how I can contribute to this eternal flow of propagating the Mystic Law to future generations. Doing this has helped me broaden my perspective on our movement for kosen-rufu and what we are fighting for, instead of being caught up in my immediate circumstances.

Contributing financially to the SGI has helped to propel my life forward. Every year as May Contribution approaches, I chant to challenge myself and increase my contribution as an expression of my appreciation. Through this opportunity, I have learned to never give up on any goal that I set and to remain unswayed by any setback. I have also become a millennium fund contributor. All the experiences I have accumulated in the process have strengthened my belief in myself.

That’s a powerful perspective. Before you started practicing, you wondered whether there was more to life. What are your thoughts today?

**Mary:** I definitely see myself now as a Bodhisattva of the Earth, who can use all my struggles as the raw material to encourage others and give them hope. I have never been so clear about my goals in life.

I have developed an interest in risk management to help avert financial crisis on a larger scale. In order to apply for graduate school, I took the GMAT qualifying exam, but my test score was low and could hurt my chances of being admitted. I continued to study and take the GMAT again and again, but my test score didn’t improve.

When I considered giving up, I thought about President Ikeda’s encouragement to win where your feet are planted. He writes:

> Those who decide to put down solid roots where they are and continue to live their lives with perseverance and hope while struggling with reality will be victors in life. It’s important not to live aimlessly, lacking any clear purpose. I therefore say to you: “Dig beneath your feet, there you will find a spring,” and “Live in a way that is true to yourself.”

In short, a real sense of happiness and deep satisfaction in life can be found only within us. *(The Wisdom for Creating Happiness and Peace: Part 2, p. 11)*

I continued to persevere. When I took my GMAT test for the seventh time, I raised my score by 100 points in just one week! I was accepted to graduate school and will finish my degree this year.

I continue to do my best at my job. This January, I received a promotion, even though I lacked the experience that the position would typically require. The promotion came with a significant salary increase, and I received a recent bonus as well. Now I am able to pay for my own housing, while helping my parents with their rent. I also continue to strengthen my bonds with my family members and do everything that I can to care for them.

**What is your determination for the future?**

**Mary:** I am very grateful for this practice, which has allowed me to completely transform my life. I am determined to build an indestructible foundation of faith with Sensei and raise many successors. I want to continue to develop my career to create value in the world, expand my heart to care for others and show actual proof of this powerful practice.

I recently attended a youth training course in Japan, where we celebrated the 60th anniversary of March 16 at the World Youth General Meeting. I learned how Sensei views each day as March 16, renewing his vow to respond to his mentor, second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda. Just like Sensei, I am determined to fight as if each day is March 16 and make the flame of my vow of mentor and disciple burn brighter still. ✨