

Buddhism Through the Looking Glass: How the Practice Helped Me Discover My True Self and Raise Self-Reflective Kids in Pursuit of Their Dreams

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As a Soka Gakkai International-USA (SGI-USA) Buddhist, I have practiced Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism for over 30 years. This essay focuses on my journey of raising three children—two sons (39, 33) and a daughter (29)—two of whom were “fortune babies” or born to parents who practiced this type of Buddhism. I will cover several Buddhist core beliefs and discuss how instrumental they were in my raising children to become capable, successful young Black people on the path to achieving their dreams.

My essay will also discuss the “mentor-disciple relationship” which is at the core of how to live one's life with beauty, energy, creativity, and passion. Additionally, I will explore how the Buddhist concept of human revolution—a process of reflection and self-reformation—enables one to see his/her/their true self and ultimately transform into an enlightened person. Human revolution guarantees practitioners “absolute freedom,” based on establishing a strong independent self, thus making it a particularly invaluable practice for people of African descent.

How it Started

In 1986 I was a stressed out single mom, petrified that my ex-husband would take our 4-year-old son, Justin, away from me. There was no reasoning with the man so I moved my son around to different day care centers or brought him to work with me. Although I was a lawyer, my rational mind was eclipsed by fear and doubt. I couldn't see a way out of this vicious cycle.

Meanwhile I searched for something spiritual to fill a gaping void in my life. I dragged Justin to visit various churches, usually attracted by a vigorous choir and a relaxed dress code. The sermons, however, left me empty and confused so I never managed to fully connect. I sensed I needed the kind of spirituality that came from within rather than in the form of a deity I had to seek outside of myself.

Then a co-worker introduced me to Nichiren Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai (“value-creating society”) organization (SGI) that I had vaguely heard about some years before. This time though, I was open to learning more. I discovered that Nichiren, a 13th century Buddhist reformer, taught that *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* is the universal law inherent in all life and established the practice of chanting *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* as a form of prayer. When I described how my ex-husband was behaving, the Buddhist leaders teaching me suggested I chant for his happiness. I balked because he made my life miserable, so why should I want him to be happy? The leaders, however, turned out to be right. It took a while but when I chanted sincerely for my ex-husband, everything changed. He stopped harassing us and even began sending child support after a long hiatus. His surprising transformation convinced me to whole-heartedly embrace this religion.

Truthfully, though, I was still somewhat confused and thought Buddhism was a kind of magic. If I just kept chanting my problems would all be resolved, right? Hmm, not so fast. Like my marriage, my credit and finances were floundering and I blamed my ex for everything. I had much more to learn.

Nam Myoho Renge Kyo, Human Revolution and the Gohonzon

My Buddhist leaders stepped in with more food for thought: didn’t I realize, they wondered, that when I prayed for my ex to be happy, I was the one who actually changed the way I responded to him? My inner change caused him to react differently to me. Aha! That was my first lesson about the need to take responsibility for everything that happens to me, rather than blame something or somebody else.

There are three parts to what we refer to as “our practice”: (a) faith (we begin simply with an open mind allowing our faith to develop and deepen with time and experience), (b) practice (we chant/pray and do activities with our lay organization and fellow members for our own happiness and we share Buddhism with others to help them become happy as well), and (c) study (we study the teachings/writings of Nichiren Daishonin and Daisaku Ikeda—leader and developer of SGI, the largest lay Buddhist association in the world).

Nichiren Buddhists chant the phrase “*Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*” (basic translation: devotion to the mystic law of cause and effect through sound) which enables us to transform our lives or experience our “human revolution.” Daisaku Ikeda says:

Human revolution means turning our lives in a positive direction, from unhappiness to happiness. It is the transformation of the tendency to allow ourselves to be swept along by force of habit or to feel ourselves at the mercy of the whims of destiny. The incredible power to do this already exists inside us. (Ikeda, n.d.-a)

The idea that I had the power to determine my own happiness was new for me and has continued to shape me. It doesn’t mean I don’t experience fear, doubt and anxiety. Instead I acknowledge their existence but don’t allow such feelings to stop me from pursuing absolute happiness as opposed to relative happiness (i.e., happiness that is contingent upon the existence of specific circumstances). Human revolution is “an ongoing process. The important question to ask yourself is whether you are on a path of continuous personal growth” (Ikeda, n.d.-b).

In order to do our human revolution we must of course look within. We chant to a mandala (a scroll and our object of worship) called the Gohonzon, which is likened to a looking glass, or mirror, enabling us to peer into our deepest selves. “The mirror of Buddhism...reveals the intangible aspect of our lives” (Ikeda, 1990). The Gohonzon contains depictions of every possible condition of life, both negative and positive. *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* is written down the center of the Gohonzon because it is the law of the universe and is inherent in all life. We have only to invoke the law through our prayer to bring out the highest con-

dition of Buddhahood in any given situation. Each of us have our own Gohonzons in our homes and we also attend meetings at our Community and Culture Centers (which are located all over the world, as Nichiren Buddhism is currently practiced in 192 countries).

Meanwhile I didn't stop blaming others right away because at first it was scary to look within. When I mustered the courage to do so, however, I saw my own flaws and mistakes but I also saw solutions. When it came to my problematic financial situation, instead of continuing to blame my ex, I understood that I needed to change my relationship to money. Sure he had made poor monetary choices but didn't I have signs of this before we married and what was I going to do to alter my situation? My practice led me to a new reality which meant sacrificing extras like eating out, impulse shopping and cable TV. By taking full responsibility, eventually I found my financial footing again. Chanting Nam Myoho Renge Kyo enabled me to both see what I needed to change as well as find the motivation to do so.

Cause and Effect

Still early in my Buddhist practice, I continued to reap numerous external benefits. I excelled at my legal job and was promoted, bought a new car, took a wonderful vacation and married the colleague who introduced me to Buddhism. Together we had two more children, Elam and Nile, so-called "fortune babies" because they were born to parents who practiced Buddhism and thus had the fortune of Nam Myoho Renge Kyo and the Gohonzon already in their lives via their parents.

More important than the external benefits, which can wax and wane, was the opportunity to do my human revolution—for me that meant my ongoing journey to uncover more of my true self, particularly as a mother. With the birth of my third child, I also gave birth to postpartum depression and all I could do was feed my baby, cry, and chant. Chanting Nam Myoho Renge Kyo kept me alive and reminded me that I would not always feel bad, that happiness was achievable again. Sometimes looking within helps us realize we may need to add a professional to our team as well. Through chanting I made a cause to find the right therapist for the task.

The more I practiced and learned about the fundamental Buddhist concept of cause and effect, the more it began to also make sense in terms of how to discipline my children. I resorted to spanking Justin because that was all I knew. (My parents spanked me and I turned out fine so it must be okay, was the woefully out-of-touch thinking.) What cause was I making though by hitting my child? It exhausted me and felt counter-productive so I stopped doing it with him and never spanked the younger two. Instead I told them that if they made the “wrong causes” there would be a response, “an effect,” from the universe, which might be me or their dad taking away a privilege or instilling a “time out” or something similarly unfun for them but not physical punishment. This more Buddhistic technique felt natural and unforced, plus it worked. Of course they still acted up, had tantrums, made the wrong choices many times, but they understood the existence of a consequence and even attempted negotiating, with varied success, what the effect might be.

This system continued even as my children grew older and even if I wasn’t around to witness the infractions. Case in point: once Justin was with friends at a pizza parlor they frequented near school. After they ate, and while the manager was in the rear of the restaurant, someone had the bright idea to leave without paying. Justin corralled them back to their senses saying that even if they didn’t get caught by the manager, something “bad” would happen to them “from the universe.” Fortunately they all bought into his prediction and paid the bill.

The concept of cause and effect is a particularly useful lesson to acquire as Black children growing into Black adults in America where being in the right can matter very little in true life or death terms. Both boys had bad tempers but the more I practiced Buddhism sincerely, the more they began to understand that kind of demeanor wouldn’t serve them well out in the world. They worked hard to curb how they respond especially in racially-charged situations either with law enforcement or strangers and thus far, they have been fortunate to walk or drive away alive. Nothing is taken for granted, though. My chanting for their safety never ceases.

Nile, my daughter, marched in Ohio’s George Floyd protest and was arrested for violating curfew. The only child who practices Bud-

dhism, she chanted to conquer her fears and to stave off Covid while crowded into one cell with several other protesters, some unmasked. She paid a fine the next day and did not contract Covid. Buddhism teaches that there are protective forces in the universe that the practitioner activates through prayer. We believe our prayer is effective because our lives embody the universal law of Nam Myoho Renge Kyo and the protective forces show up (such as being placed in a cell where no one transmits Covid).

A few different times during my now 34 years of practice, I have been asked why I, as an African American, would practice a “Japanese religion.” My response is that Nichiren Buddhism is a religion for everyone because, as a leader once told me, it is about developing our lives to the fullest and being in the “driver’s seat as opposed to riding in an Uber,” when it comes to living.

Also, the SGI organization exists to help us practice and is constantly evolving. Our meetings (prior to Covid) were consistently praised for being some of the most diverse places of worship on the globe. We even have groups within the organization to support those who are often marginalized such as language groups for those who speak English as a second language, a LGBTQ group, a People of African Descent group, and a Many Treasures group for folks over 65 and more.

One of my favorite writings by Daisaku Ikeda celebrates the beauty of difference:

Your land holds secret stores of unbounded possibility, transforming the energy of different cultures into the unity of construction, the flames of conflict into the light of solidarity, the eroding rivulets of mistrust into a great broad flow of confidence ... And blossoms in delightful multitude exude the unique fragrance of each person, each ethnicity, in precise accord with the principle of cherry, plum, peach and damson. (Ikeda, 1993)

During the pandemic I felt especially estranged from my children who were in three different cities: Los Angeles, Dayton, and Washington, DC, so I chanted to maintain close connections through texts,

phone calls and FaceTime. Then we stumbled on the idea of holding a Zoom family book club which brought us closer together in ways we didn't imagine, simply by reading and discussing books we take turns selecting. We have now read six books together and discovered more about our individual and collective priorities, views of the world, core beliefs and matters of the heart. I'm proud to know that my children are deep thinkers and great dialogue partners. Many families besides ours have come up with solutions to the distance created by the pandemic, but I see a direct relationship between my practice and keeping us all together to create value and deepen our bond.

Mentor/Disciple

Nile and other youth in the SGI helped me embrace the core concept of "Mentor/Disciple," which is another critical component of this practice. It is not, as critics mistakenly think, the idolization or "putting on a pedestal" of an individual but rather studying, understanding and exemplifying the heart of our mentors (the three SGI presidents—Toda, Makiguchi and Ikeda), namely those who came before us in establishing this practice and assuring its correct continuity. They have provided examples of how to live productive, joy-filled lives while helping others do the same. I didn't readily adapt to the Mentor/Disciple concept because of my own racial baggage. (In 1987, when I joined, the concept was termed "Master/Disciple," initially a barrier for me due to the word "master" and its close ties to enslavement but as the SGI evolved with more awareness, so did the name of the concept.)

I heard my daughter and the Buddhist youth around me eagerly speak of the Mentor/Disciple relationship in glowing terms and witnessed how embracing it propelled their lives forward. I watched my daughter confide in Daisaku Ikeda (through her written memos) about her struggles and successes, study his writings and introduce many others to the practice. I watched her life expand in a variety of ways, professionally as well as tackling leadership roles within the SGI to encourage and support other young people with their practice. Thus, she and these other youth members became my mentors, teaching me how to embrace the SGI founder and his successors to further enhance my practice and life.

I began reviewing the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and Daisaku Ikeda with more appreciation. Daisaku Ikeda's guidance about creativity altered my life: "Creativity means to push open the heavy, groaning doorway to life. This is not an easy task. ... For opening the door to your own life is in the end more difficult than opening the door to all the mysteries of the universe" (Ikeda, 1974). I had been creating characters and writing stories since I was small, which I attribute to being the daughter of a children's librarian, but I went to law school because I didn't have a plan after college. Others told me my writing was just a hobby and for a while I agreed. Fashioning a career out of something I loved seemed like an oxymoron but Daisaku Ikeda's sentiments and my Buddhist practice convinced me it was time to "open the door" to my life as a writer.

What did that mean exactly? To find out, I read more of Daisaku Ikeda's words and examined his life. Among his many skills, he was also a writer. In fact, he began crafting a 30-volume novel at age 65! Still I had so many doubts: What if I didn't have the right words or enough words? What if I was a fraud as a writer? What if I tried and failed? What if my dream was too big?

My writer path was revealed in the midst of my continuing Buddhist discovery. I decided to go back to school for an MFA in Creative Writing. I didn't begrudge myself for coming to the decision late because Buddhism teaches the concept *honnin myo* (loosely translates to "from this day forward"), essentially meaning from now on we will do our Human Revolution and move toward our dream. When it happens or how long it takes does not matter. Although the MFA was a 2-year program it took me 6 years because I was still working as a lawyer and had to attend the program part-time. It was what I needed, though, and with faculty and student encouragement, I wrote the thesis that turned into my novel. It soon became clear I needed to leave the practice of law to pursue the writing career I had been so afraid of. The fear was gone, excitement and determination appeared in its stead. Buddhism helps us transform fear into victory. Some people thought I was crazy, especially concerned family members and my accountant (who later apologized) but I no longer harbored doubts.

Justin, a pre-teen then, asked me, very matter-of-factly, whether we were going to be homeless. He wanted to prepare himself, I suppose, so I had to show him that going for your dreams could ultimately pay off.

As always, my practice forced me to peer through the inner looking glass yet again and see the entire truth of myself. No more hiding. It was definitely time to be the writer I was meant to be. I am proud to say I have continued forward movement along this path. As mentioned, my MFA thesis became my first novel, *Breathing Room* (PocketBooks 2001), which went on to win acclaim and be nominated for a Hurston/Wright debut fiction prize. I have published essays and award-winning short stories, been included in anthologies, written for *Essence*, *The Washington Post* and our Buddhist publication, *The World Tribune*. Two of my plays have been produced in Boston. This past summer my first children's book, *Nana Akua Goes to School* was published by Random House and recently won the 2021 Children's Africana Book Award and the 2021 Ezra Jack Keats Writer Award. My second children's book, *Dream Street*, published in November 2021, garnered five starred reviews and was a *New York Times* 25 Best Children's Books of 2021 selection. Additionally I enjoy my role as a professor of Creative Writing at Howard University where I am working on achieving tenure as well as writing more books.

Whenever doubt threatens to creep back in my thoughts, I read this guidance:

Our challenge is to dream of results as big as the power of the Gohonzon which has no limits. If you find you are stuck, pray to release the chains of doubt and fear clouding your mind of faith. Pray for unbound confidence and courage to win over your past and step joyfully into your bright future. (Ikeda, 2002)

How it's Going

As mentioned earlier, only one of my children embraces Buddhism, but all three are the beneficiaries of my practice. Buddhism teaches that our fortune transmits to our families. Daisaku Ikeda has written,

When the sun rises, it illuminates everything on earth.
 When a single lighthouse shines out to sea at night,
 countless vessels can navigate safely. When a family
 has one person who acts as a strong pillar, all of its
 members can lead secure, tranquil lives. (Ikeda, 2017)

Each child is equipped to overcome the obstacles that come their way. Already, Justin has survived living thousands of miles away for more than a decade and continues to create film industry opportunities for himself. Elam turned his disappointment at not having a professional basketball career into becoming a well-respected high school, and now college, basketball coach. Nile has weathered persistent self-esteem issues to become an effective Buddhist youth leader and sought-after professional dancer who now proudly claims, “I am the person of my dreams.”

I know that my example has led my children, my most precious creations, to plunge immediately into their passions rather than doing something less desirable, merely for a paycheck. They have accumulated the fortune that allows them to make such choices, which I know is due to their father’s and my Buddhist practice. Each of them is fervently pursuing her/his dream. Justin is an actor, writer, and entrepreneur in the midst of launching a new business. Elam works with the young people he cares about deeply. Nile expresses her *joie de vivre* through movement and also continuing to encourage other youth in the SGI. They are working towards reaching their pinnacles and I love seeing them uncompromised in terms of who they are and what they want to do with their lives.

A member in my local SGI organization once said that “the benefits [of this practice] for people of color are enormous because although we are aware of our history, this practice teaches us not to be burdened by it and we know we can change our karma.” Buddhism dwells in all aspects of our lives so we have the unlimited potential to liberate ourselves from self-doubt, activate our life condition of Buddhahood (bring out the Buddha within us) in each moment and achieve dreams beyond what our minds can conceive. We are able to manifest our highest “state of life” just as we are, as long as we resist being deluded by the divi-

sions inherent in our society. This Buddhism also teaches that we are in control. We affect our environment so if, for instance, our place of work harbors racial microaggressions, we have the power to change that situation through our practice.

Buddhism does not suggest that we won't experience hardships or difficulties, especially as people of African descent. Rather it teaches that without them we cannot grow and it arms us with the tools to overcome them. It also reminds us that "winter always turns to spring" (Nichiren Daishonin, 1275), which is tattooed on my wrist so I won't forget. My practice of Buddhism began with a prayer for my ex-husband which became a vow to do my Human Revolution and help others do theirs. Let us imagine this planet's transformation if everyone living on it was committed to doing the same. In our hearts we know how powerful that would be because "when we change, the world changes" (Ikeda, 1974). So if a friend or stranger asks, "Have you ever heard of Nam Myo-ho Renge Kyo?" why not thank them and give it a try.

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