



LIKE A PRAYER THE LESSON OF THE LOTUS

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but Buddhists who happen
to be gay and
female (or male) and
an artist or whatever.

The lotus flower cannot thrive in pure waters. The lotus thrives in muddy places, transforming all that muck into unstained beauty.

The lotus figures prominently in Buddhist practice and no more so than in the particular practice of Soka Gakkai, a form of Japanese Buddhism that is devoted to transformation of self and the larger world. Here in the Portland area, a group of LGBTQ practitioners gathers to transform the “muck” of their own lives into hope and happiness.

Charmaine Slye, John Renner, Romaine Harris, Susan Blake, Gae Ryan and Brad Larsen (a regular contributor to *Just Out*) say that their primary spiritual practice takes place on their own, consisting of daily chant and mindfulness. The chant is “Nam-myoho-rence-kyo” a Japanese phrase that, roughly translated, means “I devote myself to the Mystic Law of the Lotus teaching” which in itself focuses on enlightenment and revealing the Buddha nature within.

Larsen says, “Our practice is to reveal what’s already inside. For me, it’s like remembering a truth [about myself] that I had known before.” Blake says, “I devote myself to the mystic law of cause and affect through teachings.”

That happiness comes from letting go of everything that is not of the true self. Slye explains, “I experience who I am. I am being me. Nothing in the practice says ‘Don’t be who you are.’ [The task is to] find out ‘who is Charmaine?’ when it really comes down to it. We are encouraged to have courage.”

Buddhist teaching hasn’t always encouraged LGBTQ Buddhists to be completely themselves. Up until a few decades ago, LGBTQ people were advised by their teachers to enter into traditional marriages. Larsen says that his branch of Buddhism came to realize that teaching was not in line with foundational Buddhist principles. “It came down to the lesson of the peach blossom,” he said, “You don’t ask a peach to be a cherry.” In the same way, he says, Buddhism teaches that people should not try to be something they are not. Soka Gakkai International has recognized same gender marriages since 1995.

Slye says that Soka Gakkai now teaches, “If you have an issue (discomfort around LGBTQ people) that is something you need to work on.” She adds, “We’re not gay Buddhists but Buddhists who happen to be gay and female (or male) and an artist or whatever.”

The transformative practice helps people deal with minor irritations and with staggering personal losses. Harris says, “My son killed himself years ago. I was devastated but I was also so supported by my Buddhist family. It’s really true that the lotus flower thrives in the yuckiest places. [While you never want that pain] the worst suffering brings about the greatest joy.”

Ryan adds, “I tried chanting when I had nothing left to lose. I told myself that I would just keep chanting until it didn’t work anymore—it’s now 26 years later. [Chanting gives] the power to change your life and help others experience their own unique way.” ■



Just Out's Like a Prayer is written by
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