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Absolutely, Indestructibly Happy

An interview with Tina Turner

By [Clark Strand](#)
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Photo by Vera Tammen / Trunk

Tina Turner is [an American icon](#)—a remarkably versatile creative artist whose career has spanned more than sixty years. The winner of eight Grammy Awards, Turner was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991 and received a Kennedy Center Honor in 2005. But her path has not always been easy. Tina has overcome domestic abuse, discrimination, professional setbacks, life-threatening illness, and devastating personal loss. Throughout it all, she [has credited](#) her practice of [Nichiren Buddhism](#) as the source of her hope for a better world and her determination to overcome every obstacle in her life.

Born Anna Mae Bullock in 1939, Tina began her musical career in 1960 as a member of the Ike & Tina Turner Revue. She divorced Ike in 1978 and, after virtually disappearing from the music scene for several years, rebuilt her career, launching a string of hits including her 1984 solo album, *Private Dancer*. In 1986 she published a bestselling memoir, *I, Tina*, which was turned into the Academy Award-nominated film *What's Love Got to Do with It* in 1993. Tina's latest book, *Happiness Becomes You: A Guide to Changing Your Life for Good*, draws lessons from her personal life about using Buddhism to transform sorrow into joy and break through all limitations to achieve a happy and fulfilling life.

When *Tricycle* contributing editor Clark Strand interviewed Tina this past May, they discussed topics ranging from her first encounters with Buddhism to how she maintains a positive outlook in a world plagued by pandemic and social unrest.

You were already a successful songwriter and performer when you began practicing Buddhism in the early 1970s, but your personal life was in crisis. You've credited your spiritual practice with getting you safely through turbulent, sometimes frightening times. How did you discover Nichiren Buddhism? By 1973, I was distressed and exhausted from domestic abuse, and it was getting harder to hide it from some of the people around me. When I was on my own in the studio with our recording team, they'd sometimes give me looks, like they wanted to say "When are you getting out of that mess?" Which wasn't all that helpful. Then one day a young sound engineer said something different: "Tina, you should try [chanting](#). It will help you change your life."

Chanting sounded like it was probably more for college students than a mother in her thirties like me, so I put it out of my mind. A couple of months after that, my youngest son, Ronnie,

came home carrying what looked like a rosary but was actually Buddhist chanting beads. He said he'd been chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* at a friend's house up the street and asked me to go there with him to a chanting meeting.

I wanted to, but in those days I was basically a prisoner in my own home. So I told Ronnie I couldn't, and that was that. Then a few weeks later, Ike brought home this nice-looking lady to see me. He was always doing that, bringing people around to "see Tina." Well, wouldn't you know, she started talking to me about chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. Here we go again! [Laughs.]

Obviously the universe had been trying to send me a message, and I was finally ready to receive it.

What is it about the practice of chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* that works for you? When I first learned about it, I liked the fact that the practice offered me a simple, practical formula for happiness. As I began studying Buddhist teachings and chanting more, it led me to take responsibility for my life and to base my choices on wisdom, courage, and compassion. Not long after I started chanting, I began to see that the power I needed to change my life was already within me.

"You could say that chanting is a kind of spiritual performing art."

For me, the practice feels active and invigorating. In the Soka Gakkai tradition of Nichiren Buddhism, we chant with our eyes open and in vigorous rhythmic repetition, which I've always loved. Little by little, it brought out my courage to break away and live an independent life on my own.

Some friends in my neighborhood chanting group had been practicing for years before I started. They promised I'd become happier than I ever dreamed possible if I stuck with it and never gave up. They were right! I truly believe that anyone can do the same.

Years ago, a Broadway actress told me that chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* was the most popular type of Buddhist practice among entertainers. What is it about this form of Buddhism that attracts so many people in the performing arts—from actors and dancers to singers and jazz musicians? That's a great question. Buddhist teachings in general promote an open-minded, accepting, and nonjudgmental outlook, which artists find appealing.

With Nichiren Buddhism in particular, chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* has such a clear, musical rhythm—it's similar to singing. I think performers are naturally drawn to practices that involve rhythm and sound, and that may be why so many prefer chanting over quieter forms of meditation. You could say that chanting is a kind of spiritual performing art.

You have sometimes identified yourself as a "Baptist-Buddhist." What does that mean to you? I was raised in the Baptist tradition, and virtually everyone I knew in my hometown was Baptist. The Baptist influences of my childhood didn't just disappear because I started to study and practice Buddhism. I've always respected my heritage, while also having a seeking spirit. My way of communicating with Mother Nature and the universe simply changed vocabulary, from Baptist to Buddhist. The language of Buddhism works for me. And as I've learned about the world's religions and philosophies, I've seen common threads shared between them all. It's important to me to celebrate both—to find unity in diversity—which is what my Buddhist practice guides me to do.

Was it that impulse to find unity in diversity that led you to become involved with the Beyond Music Project, a not-for-profit movement that weaves together music and

inspiration from Tibetan Buddhism, Christian, Hindu, Nichiren Buddhism, and other traditions? Yes, definitely. I feel passionate about promoting interfaith and intercultural unity, which is why joining Beyond was appealing to me. The music we've created with Beyond is an invitation for all people to open their hearts to the Other, beyond any differences, and to be united as a global community.

And yet we seem to be living in an increasingly polarized world. What's your view on the divisiveness that currently dominates politics, both in America and abroad? I believe the remedy for divisiveness is to cultivate and spread compassion for all living beings. It seems in so many places there is a drought of love and kindness these days. Some people react to pain by inflicting more pain on themselves and others. This is a vicious cycle that creates more negative karma and makes things worse for everyone. Our human family must end the toxic karmic pattern of divisiveness before it ends us.

America was already reeling from violence and division before COVID-19. If anything, the pandemic seems to have made everything worse. As someone who has survived racism, family trauma, financial ruin, and the premature death of loved ones, what advice would you offer? The most important thing is to never give up. No matter what. When we choose hope over despair, we have already won. "Winter always turns to spring" is one of my favorite sayings from Nichiren. The trick is that we have to do our part to help it along.

Buddhism has taught me that hidden inside of our challenges are the lessons we must learn in order to break through to a better life. As hard as that might be to grasp in the midst of difficult times, when we can see our problems from that perspective, things naturally change. Then even the impossible becomes possible.

Choosing hope is crucial, as is finding ways to use our difficulties to move forward. In my life there were a lot of so-called impossible circumstances that I couldn't control or change, but my epiphany was that, through my spiritual practice, I could change my way of responding to challenges. I realized that the most valuable help comes from within.



Morning prayers at home in Los

Angeles, 1979 | Johnson Publishing Company Archive. Courtesy the Ford Foundation, J. Paul Getty Trust, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Smithsonian Institution

What, for you, is the most important aspect of Buddhism for people to keep in mind today? Buddhism teaches equality—the empowering principle that everyone has the potential to attain enlightenment and become absolutely, indestructibly happy. When we come to see this potential in ourselves, we can see and respect it in everyone else, too.

As the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) president [Daisaku Ikeda](#) says: “When we realize that our lives are one with the great and eternal life of the universe, we are the Buddha. The purpose of Buddhism is to enable all people to come to this realization.” This is so important because it’s open to everyone, regardless of culture, language, even religion. It’s a reminder that everyone equally has the potential for Buddhahood, for enlightenment, and that our salvation is up to us.

What makes you such a strong believer? Actual proof. Nichiren taught that spiritual practice should result in “actual proof.” And my personal practice has shown me, time after time, that it just works. Nothing is more convincing than actual proof. And that makes me a very strong believer.

You’ve never stopped struggling to better yourself, never stopped striving. What has been your biggest challenge recently? Staying physically fit and healthy after my health challenges. In the past ten years, I’ve experienced cancer, vertigo, strokes, and kidney failure. That would be a lot to handle at any age, but I got through it in my seventies! No matter how challenging it was, or might yet be, nothing can defeat my spirit.

Now at eighty, I can say with a smile that I have truly won in every aspect of my life. I am thankful that the discipline of my spiritual practice helped me to keep calm and collected, regardless of what happened, and I never felt low for very long.

Mental attitude is always half the battle, and my mental state has been clear and strong, thanks to chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*.

What would you like to share with people who are just beginning their Buddhist practice? Have patience and be determined. Never stop growing and learning. Be open to expanding your heart and mind. Become bigger than any problem you encounter. Continually broadening your inner world is the key to happiness. In the Soka Gakkai tradition, we call this process “human revolution.”

Can you say a bit more about that for our readers who might not be familiar with this principle? Human revolution is an inner transformation, a revolution of the heart. It’s the process of growth that happens when we work on expanding our best qualities in order to overcome obstacles or adversity. Think of it as a way of getting comfortable with voluntary growth.

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Stepping out of your comfort zone for the sake of self-improvement and contributing to the greater good is a lifelong practice. But wonderful things come from opening your heart and mind to new possibilities. I believe we can find a higher purpose in nearly anything we do—in work or in life. That is human revolution.

What’s the most surprising thing you’ve learned in your eighty years of life? Regardless of age, life will always have more surprises in store for you! Some surprises will bring joy and some will bring suffering. Either way you have to roll with it and, most important, learn from it. Smile and appreciate the ride—it’s a reminder that you’re alive!

If you could convince everyone in the world to do just one thing to make it better, what would that one thing be? Always be kind. You will find it comes back to you.

That’s good advice for anyone, and I suspect there are circumstances where you must first be kind to yourself. A large part of your story of personal transformation was your escape from an abusive relationship. Do you have advice for people who may feel trapped in an unhealthy relationship? You may not have direct control over what comes your way, but you do have control over how you respond. You are stronger than you think. Take care of yourself, love yourself. Through spiritual practice, you can come to see yourself and your life clearly. And when you can see clearly, you can transform any situation. Never settle for a relationship in which you aren’t respected, honored, and cherished.

You have spoken publicly about your positive view on aging. How did you manage to rise above the youth-obsessed culture of the music and entertainment business? I’ve always welcomed getting older and owned my age with pride. I’ve definitely run up against ageism in my career, but I overcame it by doing my best and showing that experience is valuable.

Experience brings wisdom. If we aim to be a happier version of ourselves today than yesterday, then age is only a number. At every stage of life, I’ve felt fortunate to experience what comes with each year. In my heart today, I feel more youthful than ever. That is because I treasure every moment.

You've taken on the air of an unflappable hero over the course of your long career. After all you've overcome and your years of spiritual practice, do you still get angry or feel despondent? Yes, of course, I'm a real human being, after all! [*Laughs.*] And like everyone else, I experience the full range of human emotions—including anger and sadness. But I've learned not to let negative feelings linger.

Whenever I feel the shadows creeping in, I increase the light however I can. Exercising, doing yoga, meditating, reading, chanting, going for a stroll, spending time with friends or family. Even just taking a nap can work wonders. But it's also possible to transform those feelings, to “change poison into medicine,” as Nichiren called it.

It's the idea that when you raise your life condition, when you improve your state of mind, you can use the resulting wisdom, courage, and compassion to convert any negative into a positive. It starts by facing problems with the knowledge that you have the power within you not only to *overcome* them, but also to *thrive* because of them—to accomplish more than you have before and reach new heights. And when your confidence needs a boost, you can recharge it by doing whatever positive practice lifts you up. Elevating your life condition is the key to creating meaningful, lasting changes.

Today, those coming to Buddhism for the first time are often in their twenties. As a friend observed recently: their first memories are of 9/11. Then came climate collapse. And now the pandemic. Do you have any advice for young people today? Be part of the solution to our world's challenges, in whatever way suits you best. Be honest, work hard, and be true to yourself. Hard work will serve you well. Don't be fooled by the allure of an easy path. Only toil gives rise to solid character.

Devote yourself to becoming the type of person who can always bring out the goodness in yourself and others. That's how to create real value, satisfaction, and sweetness in life.



Tina Turner's new book is [Happiness Becomes You: A Guide to Changing Your Life for Good](#).