

# What's Love Got to Do With It?



She's the Queen of Rock 'n' Roll. An unwanted child. A believer in the power of love. A longtime Buddhist. **Andrea Miller talks to Tina Turner.**

Tina Turner—I'll never forget my first glimpse of her. It was when I was ten years old and watched *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. She had killer legs, impressively large shoulder pads (even by eighties standards), and the most incredible raspy, sexy voice I'd ever heard. What happened to me is what, at that point, had been happening to audiences for more than two decades, and now has been happening for more than half a century: I was awed.

The Queen of Rock 'n' Roll is not just a powerhouse on stage. She is also a longtime Buddhist, having begun her practice in the 1970s while struggling to end an abusive relationship with musician Ike Turner. Soka Gakkai, the tradition to which Tina Turner adheres, is like other schools and

subschoools of Nichiren Buddhism; it focuses on the *Lotus Sutra* and teaches that chanting its title in Japanese—*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*—ultimately enables chanters to embrace the entirety of the text and uncover their buddhanature.

Turner chanting the *Lotus Sutra* is featured on *Beyond*, a CD available through New Earth Records that weaves together Buddhist and Christian prayers, and also features the singers Dechen Shak-Dagsay and Regula Curti. “Bringing together corresponding pieces from Christian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions as has been done here,” writes the Dalai Lama in the liner notes, “will allow listeners to share in these prayers, stirring thoughts of deeper respect and peace in their lives.” All revenue from the CD goes to



PHOTO BY ALBERTO VENZAGO

Tina Turner with her collaborators on the CD *Beyond*, Dechen Shak-Dagsay (left) and Regula Curti (center).

foundations dedicated to spiritual education or helping children and mothers in need.

In this interview, Turner speaks about *Beyond*, the power of song and practice, and the meaning of love. —ANDREA MILLER

*All religions speak about love, and it sounds easy to be loving. But people so frequently fail to love. Why is loving so difficult?*

Some people are born into a loving family. For example, everyone in the family greets everyone else in the morning, they sit at breakfast together, they give each other a kiss when they leave. There is harmony and love in the house. When you are born with that, you take it with you.

But some people are born into situations where they're exposed to everything *but* love. The world is full of people that are born into such situations, and they are traveling through life in the dark. No one has ever explained to them that they need to find love, and they have no education for love except for falling in love with another person, for sexual love. I believe that the problem with the world today is that we have too many people who are not in touch with true love.

*What helped you to become loving?*

When you don't come from your mother with love, you might have the gift to be surrounded by other people or situations that are loving and you learn to love in that way.

My mother didn't want a child, so I experienced being

unwanted. But I found love when I was with myself. I would go into nature, into gardens and eat fruit. I would climb trees. I looked to nature and found love because love is in nature. If you go there, hurt and angry, it can transform you. I went with nature, with animals, and I found love and harmony. I would come home at the end of the day—braids pulled out, my dress torn—and of course I got asked, "Where have you been all day!?" But I had been in a world of love and happiness.

I am very happy that I discovered love in nature because later I was in a relationship without love and I still found a way to find love. You can find love when you are of love.

*Did singing help you?*

I was singing almost from the moment I was born. Ever since I was big enough, I've been singing. When I was a little girl my mother would put me on a chair and I would sing for the shop ladies. So I was born with a voice to sing and I have been singing all my life. It might be that being a singer helped me. Maybe singing on stage helped. Maybe it was a release.

*In what way is singing a spiritual practice?*

*Nam-myoho-rence-kyo* is a song. In the Soka Gakkai tradition we are taught how to sing it. It is a sound and a rhythm and it touches a place inside you. That place we try to reach is the subconscious mind. I believe that it is the highest place and, if you communicate with it, that is when you receive information on

what to do. Singing a song can make you cry. Singing a song can make you happy. That's spirit—the spirit inside of you. If you look up “spiritual” in a dictionary, you will find that it is your nature, it is the person you are. When you walk into a room, a person might say, “Oh, she's got great spirit.” Or you can walk into a room and someone will say that you don't have spirit because it's not visible. You're kind of off or negative. Meditation and praying change your spirit into something positive. If it is already positive, it makes it better. I think that is the best answer I can give you right now.

*On Beyond, you say, “Sing—singing takes you beyond.”*

The singing that I am referring to on the CD is one that comes out of you when you hum. It's not necessarily a song, rather it's that moment when you find yourself making sounds from within—from your heart, from your spirit. Each person has a musical song from their bodies. That is something I learned over time. You can play the tune of your name and this is the hum from inside of you that can give you peace when you are really down. My grandmother had a hum, never a song. She would hum sitting in a rocking chair and I would listen. As a singer, I wanted to know what my grandmother was singing. But it was the song of her soul. This song I am referring to is about singing, being happy, enjoying music, and even when you're depressed, still singing. You must try to find that sound or song within you. You might find that it is just a “huuuuaa” or a “hum” or something in falsetto. But it is a sound, which comes out of you that gives you peace.

*In what ways has your practice changed you?*

I feel that chanting for thirty-five years has opened a door inside me, and that even if I never chanted again, that door would still be there. I feel at peace with myself. I feel happier than I have ever been, and it is not from material things. Material things make me happy, but I am already happy before I acquire these things. I have a nature within myself now that's happy. Practicing the words “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” for so long has put me in another frame of mind, so that when I don't practice for a day or a week, I still feel happy. But I do practice.

Since I have been practicing Buddhism, I have to say I don't experience the feeling of guilt anymore. Practice clears the way. Chanting “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” makes you comfortable because it removes uncomfortable mental attitudes. It doesn't just buy you a car or a house—it takes care of you.

*What is your practice like? Do you ever include elements or practices from other Buddhist sects?*

My practice these days is how I want it, how I feel it. I can take some time on weekends and just stay in my practice room and meditate, drink water, walk around. Depending on how busy I am, sometimes I go without practicing for a week and then I just click right back into it. I am not on the schedule of practicing

precisely every morning and evening, but I consider myself a Buddhist. It is within me. Do I ever associate with other Buddhist elements? I haven't felt the need except when something comes to me directly. Since I've been living in Switzerland, I went to a shrine elsewhere in Europe and I met His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Everybody knows I am a practicing Buddhist.

**Prayer is prayer. It doesn't matter what holy words you chant, what matters is that you do it with all your involvement—physical, mental, spiritual.**

*Would you say that you're still evolving spiritually?*

Oh, I think as long as you are on this planet as a human being, you never get to the top of spiritual evolution. I think that you evolve until you leave the planet and you don't know how far you'll get until you leave.

*You were born into a Christian family. Can you tell me about your transition from being a Christian to being a Buddhist?*

I was born into a Baptist family. I went to church every Sunday. The preachers were speaking the words of God, but I didn't really hear what the preacher said. What affected me was the environment. It was the people's “amen” in agreeing with the preacher. We had a young Baptist reunion to learn about the Bible and it put me in touch with information about God and Jesus and being nice to people. My mother taught me that saying the Lord's Prayer would help me, so I kept saying it straight through life until I was introduced to Buddhism.

But it didn't matter that I changed from being a Baptist to being a Buddhist because I learned later that they're the same. They just use different words. Maybe I stopped saying the Lord's Prayer and went into Buddhism because I needed new words—I needed refreshment—to get to the next step.

I noticed that saying the Lord's Prayer and chanting a mantra had a similar effect on me. But I was chanting a mantra for longer periods of time and more often than I had ever said the Lord's Prayer. I didn't have this system for the Lord's Prayer and it's a system that works for me.

*Is it important to have a particular place to practice?*

When I practiced the Lord's Prayer I simply went down on my knees, so you can pray anywhere, but there are psychological benefits when you have a shrine in a quiet place in your house where it is comfortable to sit. You can cry your heart out there and it is private. The fact is that you have to have your quiet place in your house, your Buddha shrine. It is not private at church where you have to listen to the priest. At your place, you are focusing on something your person and your mind needs.

*In your view, how often do people need to practice?*

Some people have to practice a lot—morning, middle of the day, evening. Some people can practice once a day. Traditionally, when you're starting out, you practice twice a day—when rising in the morning and before retiring in the evening. When I was having the hardest time of my life, I was practicing for four hours a day. And I saw how it was working. My reactions were spot on and I knew that was because of my practice, because my normal reactions weren't that way.

*Why do you consider it important to have a CD that combines Buddhist and Christian prayers?*

The answer to this question is unity. Years ago, when I was on tour in New Zealand, I was given a purple book that I couldn't stand the color of, but somehow I kept it and opened it after my tour. It explained that God is within us and it doesn't matter what your religion is. Whatever words you use, the results are the same. If you are in another country and you go to their meditation area to pray with them and you do your own prayer and they do theirs, that's fine.

The CD *Beyond* is to remind people or to educate people that God is inside them. How you tap into God is your decision. Whether you meditate or whether you become a Christian, it's up to you. *Beyond* is an invitation to open the heart for all religions and to become united.

*How did you get involved with Beyond?*

I was invited to get involved in the project by Regula Curti, born Christian in Switzerland, and Dechen Shak-Dagsay, born Buddhist in Tibet. I thought it was a good idea because I was already on the journey of unity, of thinking about how there are religious wars and how someone has to help people know that God is to be found within, so that peace and harmony will evolve.

Regula and Dechen and I started to chant together and we discovered unity on a deeper level, more energetically and spiritually. The thought of unity in prayer became, for all three of us, a field to explore musically. We hope that everybody realizes that the system—the system of God, of contacting God, of being a better person, and of correcting your life conditions—is within you. What we are trying to say is that it doesn't matter what holy words you chant, what matters is that you do it with all your involvement—physical, mental, spiritual. It doesn't matter if Regula sings Ave Maria and Dechen sings the prayer for Tara and I sing the *Lotus Sutra*. Prayer is prayer. What's important is doing it and not worrying about how others are praying.

*On Beyond you say, "When you go beyond that's where you find true love." What does that mean to you? What is true love?*

There are many different forms of love, but true love is something that transcends doubt, something that is not judgmental, something that is openhearted and accepting. We are not talking

about passionate love, sexual love. We are talking about a love of human beings, of the planet—the love of seeing a little flower growing out of the earth at a certain time of the year.

If you have the capacity to find love in beauty, that is the door opener of true love. True love comes from looking at a beautiful day and the feeling that comes from that. Perhaps you don't have the words for it, but you just feel, "Ah, gosh, what a wonderful day," and that particular moment makes you happy. You see beauty and you embrace it—that is love.

*What or where is this "beyond" that you refer to?*

Oh, that's a deep question. Let's start with meditation. There is a stage in practice where you don't faint, you don't black out, but you are in a space. In this space you are able to stop the conscious mind, the one that constantly talks and gives you all kinds of information from your eyes, your ears, your nose. When you're able to get into that space, that is "beyond." That's where you find truth. In this stage of my life, I personally believe that you get truth from your subconscious mind and by meditating you get into the subconscious mind. Meditation opens the space I call "beyond."

*What does it mean for you as a rock singer that your newest album is about prayer?*

It means that people who work in the arts need prayer as much as anyone else. I don't separate my work as a rock singer from prayer. When I went on stage to make a living, I made people happy with my work. The feedback was always that I inspired people to get out and help themselves to go forward, to practice Buddhism. Everything has been very positive and that's because of my spiritual practice.

I feel alone now—my mother is gone, my sister is gone. But I have two sons, I have my relationship with my partner, Erwin, and I have my practice. I feel that I have help. The practice takes care of me. If you practice, you will see that this is exactly what it does. ♦