

THE HEART OF THE MENTOR

AFTER an incredibly difficult winter season, spring is finally here. In May, nature shows off her treasure trove of magic. The chill winds we braced against just the other day are now warm, embracing breezes. May is also the month that celebrates mentor and disciple. Since the days of my youth, I have eagerly looked forward to this time. For me, May 3 is truly New Year's Day. It is the day I make a fresh determination to follow the way of mentor and disciple. This year I do so with a new insight and a deeper commitment than ever.

It has been thirty-eight years since SGI President Ikeda became the leader of the Soka movement. What I've been reflecting on as we approach this May 3 is how, for virtually all of these thirty-eight years, he has been assaulted with waves of criticism; how every imaginable accusation has been hurled in his direction. I've thought of how his name has been vilified in the Japanese tabloid press; how he has been schemed against and lied about and betrayed even by those he trusted. And how in all this time, just like the spring that appears no matter how harsh the winter, he has never retreated, not even an inch. What an awesome display of courage and conviction.

Yet, isn't the way of mentor and disciple one in which there is no difference between the two? Hasn't he always tried to inspire the same qualities in us? But we sometimes doubt we can reply. I think of how often I've heard a member say, "But he's in Japan and I'm here." Or, "We don't even speak the same language, how can I be close to his heart?" In practical terms if people trusted by President Ikeda could betray him, then being close to him or speaking the same language is certainly not a prerequisite for understanding the mentor's heart—no more so than living next to the bank can make us rich. So I think one step we can take is to unburden ourselves from the idea that conditions or environment have anything to do with limiting or enhancing understanding.

But that's the first step. As you may have read in a recent *World Tribune*, President Ikeda in a speech given this past March 16 challenged us all to succeed him as the next president of the SGI. Being close to the heart of the mentor and capturing his spirit is one thing, but to become the next president seemed nearly impossible until I realized that they are one and the same. The challenge is to expand the condition of our lives. Nichiren Daishonin tells us: "You must never seek any of Shakyamuni's teachings of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the universe outside yourself. Your mastery of the Buddhist teachings will not relieve you of the sufferings of birth and death in the least unless you perceive the nature of your own life" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 4).

I BEGAN this article by saying I had a new insight this year. It is to take whatever action I can to blunt the force of persecutions hurled at President Ikeda. But what can I do? I can certainly do my best to behave in a humanistic manner. And I can put forth an even greater effort to understand his vision, his beliefs.

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How else but to read his speeches and guidance.

For instance, his 1998 Peace Proposal is in this issue of *Living Buddhism*. In previous years I've sometimes been intimidated by its length or by concepts I imagine to be over my head. But this year, in spite of all that, I've picked it up immediately and begun to read it. While I'm reading this or any of his other writings, if I can find a sentence or phrase or an idea that I can get excited about that makes my heart smile, it will find the smile in another person's heart. And when I talk about it with someone else, and that person can pick up on my excitement, it can become an inspiration for that person to take action in his or her life.

I'll finish by sharing an anecdote about the first time I met President Ikeda. It was in 1964 when I was appointed a student division leader. This was a position I really wanted badly. I think it was the first and last time I chanted for a position. You see, one had to be a student division leader to get invited to the lectures President Ikeda was giving once a month on the "Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings."

That January I was appointed and was able to attend. This was a remarkable experience for me. Then in March, it was graduation month. President Ikeda invited about thirty of us to join him for dinner after the lecture in the basement dining room of the headquarters building. I had seen President Ikeda on stage at large meetings, but this would be the first time I would actually be close to him. After dinner he walked among us and shook our hands. I was far in the back of the room, but he came up to me anyway. He looked me straight in the eye and asked me my name. When I told him, he thought for a moment and said, "I will not forget your name." I was moved that he would say such a thing to me, a poor, undistinguished student. Tears filled my eyes. I understood that he was treating me as an individual rather than just someone in the crowd. I instantly sensed that he cared so deeply. That is the essence of my relationship with President Ikeda. I had never in my life met a person like that.

President Ikeda is a man who understands the heart of others. It has always been his determination that people grow and develop. From that he has never wavered. I can't help but think of what Nichiren Daishonin told Shijo Kingo when he wrote "The Three Kinds of Treasure"—that "the real meaning of the Lord Shakyamuni Buddha's appearance in this world lay in his behavior as a human being."

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