

## UNDERSTANDING MENTOR AND DISCIPLE The Perfect Relationship

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*In this issue, we begin a 10-part series on the mentor–disciple relationship with a special two-part essay by Dr. Alfred Balitzer of Claremont College.*

Last July, SGI President Ikeda honored me in one of his speeches by quoting a few words from a letter I had written to him about the mentor–disciple relation. Speaking about mentor–disciple to President Ikeda is a sure antidote for pride: In this period of world history, no one understands more fully or deeply the true meaning of the relation than Daisaku Ikeda. Therefore, I wish to warn the reader that my contribution to the dialogue on mentor–disciple will be meager.

Mentor–disciple is that relationship which, when added to all others — teacher–student, father–son, a founder to his people — perfects the social bond and elevates the participants to a higher plane of humanity. Mentor–disciple infuses the customary relationships of life with a truly selfless motive, drawing the parties closer in pursuit of a common ideal and diminishing the incentives that cause relationships to founder, including egotism and the desire for material success. When touched by the spirit of mentor–disciple, ordinary relationships are transformed and the purpose of nature in man fulfilled. To the extent that all other forms of human association have their meaning enhanced by participation in the mentor–disciple relation, mentor–disciple is the most fundamental and the most perfect of all forms of human association. I understood this only imperfectly until I reflected upon guidance President Ikeda gave to my son during our first and subsequent meetings.

It might seem incredulous to some to hear that mentor–disciple is the most perfect form of all human associations. “After all,” some might question, “are not husband–wife and mother–daughter examples of relationships that spring from nature itself?”

The answer to this query is to be found in the principle underlying all human relations, the pursuit of happiness: If one’s own happiness results from devotion to assisting another attain happiness, then mentor–disciple, which dedicates each party to the happiness of the other, is the most perfect of all human associations and the model which we should strive to imitate in our own relationships.

Not all teachers are mentors and not all students disciples. Mentor–disciple is rare, particularly in today’s desiccated learning environment where education no longer speaks to the totality of human existence, sundering the natural bonds, moral and intellectual, that bind teacher and student in life’s most important enterprise.

On the “left,” teachers urge students to commit themselves to various theories of social change, often with little regard for the individual whose quest includes knowledge of life’s purpose. On the “right,” teachers encourage learning for the sake of a prosperous career, all too frequently without reference to the longing that young people have for participation in a greater good. Other teachers collect knowledge like some collect antiques, advocating the acquisition of knowledge “for its own sake.”

It is the rich, caring relationship of mentor–disciple that considers the whole human being as the object of education. Mentor–disciple reunites teacher and student in a common mission, the fulfillment of which requires the full, unstinting dedication of both parties. It puts the needs of the student ahead of abstract ideology, narrow self-interest or dilettantism,

and it gives the teacher a reason to teach once again.

Self-knowledge, not knowledge for its own sake, is the purpose of acquiring knowledge, according to Socrates, the 5th-century Greek father of Western philosophy. In turn, self-knowledge gives us an understanding about what benefits us and others as human beings. Self-knowledge is a bridge to humanity and to the fulfillment of life's purpose.

Socrates imparted his wisdom to his disciple Plato, who imparted it to his disciple Aristotle — passing from mentor to disciple in a tradition that has lasted for more than two millennia. One of the important functions of mentor–disciple is that it acts as a vessel, transporting and protecting over time truths of great importance to humankind. Especially during the dark periods of human history, mentor–disciple is often the common man's only beacon, the only source of truth and compassion, therefore, of hope.

When the relation of mentor–disciple is added to that of teacher–student, a common mission results, comprehending the good of each in a greater good. Its physiognomy is much like Aristotle's description of friendship: one spirit in two bodies. Participation in a common mission, however, only partially describes the mentor–disciple relation: A common mission may be two cannibals contemplating their dinner! The mission, then, must be for the advancement of humanity. Aum Shinrikyo leader Shoko Asahara celebrated death and destruction, forming a slavish pact with his followers for the satisfaction of dark, Satanic urges.

Mentor–disciple celebrates life. It is not slavish; to the contrary, it is a voluntary relationship, enhancing all relationships that embrace it, including those that are not voluntary, such as father–son. For this reason, it is the ultimate expression of freedom. Because it elevates both parties it is the embodiment of wholesomeness.

I would like to conclude by speaking about the mentor. Mentoring is not a part-time hobby; rather, it is a way of life. Dedicating himself so thoroughly to others deprives the mentor of many consolations that are part of the ordinary expectations of life. What, then, does the mentor gain from the mentor–disciple relation? Why does the mentor, who has striven mightily, often against great odds, for so many years, now humble himself, devoting his understanding and his great powers to others, especially to the most untutored of the species, for their benefit? Why does he make himself the servant of others? At the pinnacle of life, why does he not just reap the glory?

Mentoring is an exhausting and inexhaustible way of life: It tires and it energizes all at the same time. Even while beset by fatigue, the mentor draws energy from his disciples, seeing in them the spirit that first animated him — seeing in them the continuation of the things for which he has lived and dedicated his life. They are his living memorial.

Furthermore, the mentor is driven by an intransigent force of nature — his unconquerable compassion for his disciples. In 1838, Abraham Lincoln, speaking on “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions” to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Ill., reflected on the differences between a statesman and a tyrant. The statesman, Lincoln pondered, could be a tyrant except for this devotion to the people who have entrusted him with power. How easy it would be, he thought, for the statesman to cross the line, to become a Bonaparte, and rule for his own sake rather than for the sake of his people. The difference between the two, Lincoln concluded, is the compassion of the statesman for his people, a compassion that drives him to protect their happiness. It is from dedicating himself to their happiness that his glory results. I think this example amply illustrates why the mentor becomes the servant to his disciples.

***(To be continued)***

Title: The Perfect Relationship--1  
Subject: World Tribune 02/14/97 n.3126 p.13 WT970214p13 Claremont, California  
Author: Alfred Balitzer  
Keywords: California Claremont Concepts Disciple Mentor Perfect Practice Relationship Society Study  
Terms Tribune Understanding World