

## **PERSPECTIVE: Trust Comes Through Friendship**

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I was as antsy as a 6-year-old waiting for the circus show to begin. Then the door opened and Daisaku Ikeda entered the room to wild applause. Intent on separating the man from the celebrity, I sat and stared. Who was this man? It took me back to the beginning of my practice in Toronto.

For the first four years of my practice, I struggled with my negativity and doubts about the practice and about SGI President Ikeda. I trusted no one.

In 1972, following my move to New York City, and the leaders asked each of us to choose one of them as a friend in faith. I chose my women's division chapter chief, Emi Kamiya. From the beginning, I felt that she was sincerely interested in how my practice was progressing.

She promptly returned my telephone calls and was always asking me questions that provoked thought. I began to trust. First, I trusted Mrs. Kamiya, and then through her constant encouragement — “Don't give up. Let's both chant for your goal. When will you call me next?” — I began to trust the Gohonzon.

Years passed and because I had begun to develop qualities that I admired in that very special, compassionate woman, others began to ask me to take more responsibility. Emi's concern for others had indeed become my model.

When there was a major reorganization and Emi was no longer my chapter chief, she was still my friend. For the next 20 years, we built a friendship that could only be described as life sustaining. She was the embodiment of a Gakkai friend. Emi could be counted on to not only encourage and empower but to chastise when she believed it was necessary — “Be quiet and listen now. I'm trying to help you get to the next level of understanding.”

She began asking me to help her research background information for her study lectures. As we discussed the basis for a lecture and she answered my questions, my view of the practice matured. It became more natural to chant and, of course, the more I chanted, the more I could see my life. And what a mess it was!

Emi was undaunted. She kept right on encouraging me. Every time she went to Japan, she “reported” to me about what President Ikeda had said or done at a meeting. When viewed through her eyes, everything looked, at the very least, different. This was a chaotic time for the organization. Emi never wavered and, because of her conviction, neither did I.

Over and over she would encourage me to challenge my negative karma. She rejoiced over every victory as if it were her own. It was.

As my family problems turned around, I surrendered my cynical view of the world. Suddenly, Daisaku Ikeda began to seem a lot more altruistic. Each of my personal problems began to appear as nothing other than training. Life began to appear to be an on-the-job training course that would enable me to help others.

I noticed that many of the people I had introduced to Buddhism had family problems that suspiciously resembled mine. Now I heard myself quoting Emi and even suggesting that members come to visit her with me.

Visiting Emi did not feel like anything but friends coming together. There was no formality. Every visit was built on true life-to-life dialogue. Long before *dialogue* was a Gakkai buzz word, she was teaching me to lead by listening with a genuinely open heart. Her response was always based on the Goshu. She embodied humanism.

Then, in late 1990, I picked up the phone and a very breathless Emi said, “President Ikeda has been removed as head of the lay organizations at the head temple. Do you know

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what that means?” Well, frankly, I didn’t, but I found out along with everyone else. As what came to be called the priesthood issue unfolded, I began to appreciate President Ikeda’s incredible strength and his desire to protect the members. I read President Ikeda’s poem “Life” and studied the novelized history of the Soka Gakkai in *The Human Revolution* and *The New Human Revolution*.

President Ikeda appeared differently to me. So did the Gohonzon. Somewhere along the way, it had truly become the lantern in my night — and the first hands that I had grasped as I crossed my sea of suffering were those of Daisaku Ikeda and Emi Kamiya. From them, I learned how to hear with my heart and how to speak with my life.

When Emi died of cancer in November of 1995, she taught me two more lessons. The first was how to face death with dignity and courage. To my surprise, the second was how much Josei Toda meant to Daisaku Ikeda. It wasn’t until her death that I understood what it means to want to continue someone else’s work; what it means to be part of a mentor–disciple relationship.

It started when she helped me learn to trust — her, the Gohonzon, President Ikeda. And now I can do no less than offer that to others.

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