

UNDERSTANDING MENTOR AND DISCIPLE The Perfect Relationship — 2

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*This is the second part of Dr. Alfred Balitzer's essay on the mentor–disciple relationship.
(See the Feb. 14 issue for part one.)*

My view of the profound relation between mentor and disciple comes largely from the Jewish tradition. In 70 C.E., the Roman General Titus burned the Temple in Jerusalem; a few years later the Emperor Hadrian forbade Jewish religious practices, crushed Jewish resistance to Roman rule and expelled the Jews from their ancestral land. Thus began the Diaspora, ending only in our time with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. From the 1st century on, rabbis, or teachers, replaced the priest class as the guardians of Jewish belief and the mentor–disciple relationship became the sacred vessel that carried the Law across the centuries.

There are many edifying examples of mentor–disciple in the Jewish tradition, although one in particular has had a lasting influence on my life: the example of Moses Maimonides, a man whose influence on Judaism parallels that of Nichiren's on Buddhism.

Maimonides was born in the Spanish city of Cordova on March 30, 1135, less than a century before the birth of Nichiren. The son of a prominent family, Maimonides had a blessed childhood and was recognized as a prodigy. However, when he was only 13, his serene life was shattered by war and religious persecution. Following the capture of Cordova by a fanatical Islamic sect, Maimonides' family was forced to conceal their Jewish practice.

After a decade of playing out a dangerous deception, the family fled through North Africa to Cairo, Egypt. Along the way, they settled for a brief period in Morocco, where Maimonides' mentor, Rabbi Judah ibn Shoshan, was arrested, tried and executed for practicing Judaism. Soon after arriving in Egypt, Maimonides lost his father and his brother, the latter on a voyage with all the family wealth.

War, persecution and poverty could not defeat Maimonides. Challenged by adversity, he reached down into himself for the resolve to overcome his circumstances, sustained by the spirit of his ancient faith and the belief that his contribution to humanity still lay ahead of him.

And what contributions he made! In Egypt he became the preeminent physician of the age, tending the Sultan, the famous Saladin, at his court. Furthermore, he became the foremost philosopher of medieval Judaism, exploring the boundary between faith and science. Maimonides also codified the ancestral Law of the Jews, bringing new clarity, understanding and vitality to the Law, leading many to conclude that he was the greatest expounder of the Law since it was first given to the Jewish people by his namesake, the Prophet Moses.

Maimonides was also the most renowned teacher of the Jewish middle ages. Although the cream of Jewish youth gathered around him in Cairo to study the Law, it was not for the purpose of creating an idle and arrogant intellectual class. Rather, it was for the sake of perpetuating the Law, the central purpose of which is to destroy idolatry.

Idolatry divides humankind into contentious factions, creating war and blinding people to the fundamental truth of Judaism, the oneness of all things. It is also for this reason that

Maimonides argued for the belief in God's incorporeality. To believe that God has a body or form is, according to Maimonides, another form of idolatry. Under Maimonides' tutelage, these students were transformed into disciples, sharing Maimonides' purpose and spirit. Maimonides nurtured them like tender plants so that they would bloom for the next generation.

One young man, Joseph, traveled "from the ends of the earth" to study with Maimonides, but was forced to interrupt his instruction before completing his course of study. For the sake of his young student, Maimonides wrote his famous *Guide of the Perplexed*, a monumental work dedicated to Joseph "and his like."

A mentor can show greater compassion to this disciple, has greater gift to give, than his guidance, which serves to protect the disciple and to strengthen him for the time when he must carry on alone without his mentor. That gift is best conferred orally given the familiar nature of mentor-disciple. However, once events compelled Joseph to interrupt his studies, Maimonides provided Joseph with a book, the seven sections of which, when carefully considered, would open Maimonides' mind to him.

Writing is an imitation of speech, the most basic and powerful form of human intercourse. Speech reaches the heart as well as the mind. A treatise, such as Maimonides wrote, appeals principally to the mind. SGI President Ikeda's English-language works are largely speeches or forms of speech, as, for example, his many dialogues. He imitates in print the most natural of all human communication, imparting through the printed word his great and indomitable compassion, reaching the heart and mind of his reader, admonishing and inspiring.

For President Ikeda, the emphasis on mentor-disciple is as a life-affirming association. For the Jewish tradition, the emphasis is associated with the preservation of a people. Maimonides' book gives warning: The world is a snare full of idols. Joseph's gift was intended to protect him against idolatry in all of its forms, including science, by taking him through the perplexities he might experience, distinguishing truth from idolatry and falsehood. These two approaches illustrate the differences as well as the similarities between Buddhism and Judaism as regards mentor-disciple, suggesting, I believe, fertile ground for further dialogue.

There is one last dimension of mentor-disciple that I wish to discuss by citing a few words from another letter that I wrote to President Ikeda. Speaking of founders, I wrote that:

History turns on the twin pillars of founders and peoples.... Based on deep insight into the nature of things, founders articulate an intellectual and moral horizon that, put into symbols, words and institutions, gives purpose and daily guidance to the lives of people. It is for the sake of the people that founders do their work, fulfilling their destiny and gaining their role in history. It is the peculiar genius of founders that they are able to become the mentor of an entire people, performing on a cosmic level what the rest of us are only capable of doing on a person-to-person basis. Thus, the real heart of the relationship of founders to people is the mentor-disciple relation.

To conclude, there is, in my view, a better way to learn about the true meaning of mentor-disciple than to study the words and deeds of Daisaku Ikeda. Pick up his books, read his speeches, study his history! Make them your own, inscribing them on your heart and mind. Then, put them into practice. Mentor-disciple is not an abstract, intellectual concept. Rather, through it you will change the world and, with it, yourself.

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