

UNDERSTANDING MENTOR AND DISCIPLE
A Relationship That Depends on Me
BY CURT YOUNG, LOS ANGELES

Probably one of the most amazing relationships I have is with someone I've never actually met, Daisaku Ikeda. It started in 1976, soon after I joined the SGI. I happened upon his lecture in the *World Tribune* on the Gosho "The True Entity of Life." It's a lecture I have since studied many times. The thinking so impressed me that I sought out and read other things he had written. And of course, the more I read the more I was impressed.

As the years passed it occurred to me that someday I would really like to meet this man. Not in a formal setting — that would be too foreboding — but over a cup of coffee, where we could just talk. I thought of the kind of relationship I had, for instance, with my high school English teacher, or with a particular literature professor and a history professor, both during college. These were people I deeply respected, people I could frankly discuss all sorts of things with. And they were people who were interested in me. But the opportunities to meet Daisaku Ikeda, under any circumstances, just weren't there.

For the first 10 years of my practice I lived in New York, which wasn't on his itinerary, except on one occasion in 1980. But I was too new a member to get in on the meeting. Besides, in those days, I was more interested in reading what he had to say than meeting him anyway.

Then in 1984 I participated in the 5th World Peace Youth Culture Festival in Kansai. He apparently attended our garden party at Soka University. I didn't see him, although while waiting for our bus after the festivities, I caught a glimpse of him as he got into his car.

The next year, 1985, I was in Hawaii. So was he, but again we didn't meet. Everybody else I knew bumped into him in the hotel lobby, or in a restaurant or while strolling along the beach. Not me.

In 1989, I moved to Los Angeles. Now, I thought, was my chance. A year later he would be visiting here. To cover all my bases I even bought one of those dreadful blue polyester suits we used to wear back then!

It didn't work. Seating in the main auditorium was limited; so I, along with a group of others, was shuttled off to our local community center where we watched the meeting on closed circuit television.

I quickly got over my disappointment, though, realizing that I was actually better off there. Had I been in the auditorium, I'd probably have been seated far in the back behind someone whose head I couldn't have seen over. Here I was face to face with my "teacher" on that big screen in front of the room.

I could see the warmth literally pour from his eyes. And I connected to his brilliant sense of humor. It was as if we were shaking hands through that TV monitor.

I enjoyed that meeting so much that I now wanted more than ever to meet him. I also began to develop a low-grade grumble, which would get a little louder as the months passed, that went something like: "Why is it that whenever I see a photograph from a meeting with President Ikeda, the same people are always there? It isn't fair, why don't they give someone else, namely me, a chance?"

Whenever I voiced this to my leaders, the well-intentioned ones, sincerely trying to encourage me, would say things like, "Yes, I remember the first time I met President Ikeda, it was...." Then they would quickly add, "But you know, it's really not important whether you actually meet him or not...." Whatever else they were saying faded away as I thought, "I'll believe that when someone who hasn't met him can tell me that!"

A couple of years later a group of reformist priests visited the United States. One, I

remember, went to Washington, D.C. I read the account of his trip in the *Seikyo Times*. What he said affected me profoundly. He said that the mentor–disciple relationship depends on the disciple. That simple statement, which I’m sure I must have heard a thousand times before, suddenly made all the sense in the world. I realized that the type of relationship I had with President Ikeda, just like any other relationship, was totally up to me. Not him.

That’s when lots of other things began to click. I had heard, for instance, that every day President Ikeda prays for the happiness and well-being of members throughout the world. I figured that his prayer must be just hanging out there in the universe for whoever decides to pick up on it. So I did. And I reciprocated: I sent prayers for his happiness and well-being, too. I was particularly motivated to do so because of the horrible slander he was being subjected to, especially in Japan. The funny thing was that my prayer wasn’t coming from a sense of obligation or anything silly like that. It was very natural, like the kind of prayer I would and do send to any of my friends whose well-being I truly care about.

I can say that from there, the relationship deepened. I began to see the things we had in common, like our love of books and reading and poetry and music. I would even drop him a note of appreciation from time to time. He had, after all, introduced me to a body of literature I might never have known otherwise. Like Tolstoy’s writings on culture and religion done toward the end of his life. The poetry of Heinrich Heine. The work of Natalia Sats, founder of the Moscow Children’s Theatre. Hall Caine’s *The Eternal City*. Romain Rolland. The wonderful cultural observations and poetry of Goethe. Before Mr. Ikeda, all I knew of Goethe was *Faust*. The list goes on and on. Then there’s the music. Beethoven is also one of my favorite composers.

And never far from the surface of my relationship with Mr. Ikeda is the sense I have of his wonderful and infectious sense of humor. What character this man has!

The terms of our relationship allow for great flexibility. I can access it anytime I want. I think of my daimoku as a sort of cosmic telephone hookup. When I want to talk to him, all I have to do is “ring him up.” And he answers in the most remarkable ways. Whether it’s the next Headquarters Leaders Meeting speech, his “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra” or the “Discussions On Youth,” they all seem like his responses to my questions. The way I read them now, it’s as if they all begin: “Dear Curt, here’s what I think about what you’re thinking about today....”

Another great thing about our relationship is that I didn’t have to learn Japanese! He didn’t have to learn English. We don’t need interpreters and go-betweens. Our relationship is just there, just as it is with any friend.

Now is all this real? Or have I psyched myself into feeling good about a situation I had no control over anyhow? I found out when President Ikeda visited the United States this past summer. I thought, there’s just no way we’re not going to actually meet this time. Well, guess what? We didn’t. And of course I was disappointed.

I shared how I was feeling with my dearest friend (who happens to be my wife). During our conversation, something dawned on me. Early on in this article I mentioned that I wished someone who had never met him could tell me it didn’t matter whether we actually met.

What I realized is that it’s me. I’m that person who has never met President Ikeda who can honestly say, from personal experience, that the quality of my relationship with him has nothing to do with whether I ever actually meet the man or not. It does, however, have everything to do with me.

And who knows, maybe we will meet someday. Maybe we won’t. It’s no longer a source of angst, though, because in either case, nothing will change. The cosmic connection is too deep.

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