

Understanding Mentor and Disciple: Changing Myself Is the Bottom Line
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Though I have met SGI President Ikeda many times, in Hawaii, Japan and last year in Florida, I do not consider myself qualified to write on the theory of mentor and disciple. However, I want to express what I feel about the mentor–disciple relationship — how it has moved my life and activities.

In November 1975, when I was a seven-month member, I visited the Hiroshima Atom Bomb Peace Memorial. There I understood the core of President Toda’s admonition to abolish nuclear weapons and protect the absolute sanctity of life.

Despite knowing little about our SGI president or the mentor–disciple relationship, I realized there that the mission of achieving kosen-rufu is deadly serious. The Hiroshima memorial itself is a silent teacher.

I burned into my mind the touching black-and-white photograph titled *Child With a Rice Ball*. It shows a little girl being held in her mother’s arms after the bombing: Only the girl, with dirty hair, a smudge on her face and a blank expression, can be seen — in her hand is a rice ball. Somehow the photographer captured her innocence and fragility, suggesting the insanity of what had been done. Later, I would use this as a mental picture to propel me again and again into youth division propagation activities.

As a youth division member, I started to feel compelled to read all of President Ikeda’s works so I could grasp his many different perspectives. I asked myself: “What does President Ikeda think?” “How does President Ikeda view this subject?” “Is President Ikeda romantic?”

It is a privilege, I believe, to read an author’s work while he is still living. I felt that if I did not try to read everything, I would remain blind and shortchange myself and my lifetime practice with him. I endeavored to use whatever I learned for all the members as I participated in Gajokai and Soka Group.

This proved very beneficial when the “Nikken phenomena” occurred. Because of my study of Nichiren Daishonin’s works, as well as President Ikeda’s many books and speeches, the emotional arguments about the Nikken sect, pro or con, did not affect me, no matter how bad the overall situation appeared to be. I had already decided to be a disciple of President Ikeda at least 10 years earlier.

On a 1994 trip to Japan, the Nikken sect was the main topic. The oft-repeated guidance of SGI General Director Eiichi Wada was that those who understood deeply the issues surrounding the Nikken sect should go to the front lines and inform the members.

Upon returning to Hawaii, I developed a non-emotional, factual lecture on the Nikken sect based on the Lotus Sutra, Buddhist history and President Ikeda’s guidance. I proceeded to give nine to 13 lectures a month from April through August 1994.

Many people helped me to get the invitations necessary to speak at their meetings. And many said that I helped them reduce their confusion about the issue, that with their newfound clarity about it they could take correct action.

At the same time, through my studies of President Ikeda’s various speeches, I felt that he was alluding to a so-called direct fusion period. *Direct fusion* is a term I use to indicate a time when the universal Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin fuses and melds with American culture. Both the organization and the country will change somewhat. I envision a network-type, rather than hierarchical organization, with facilitators who make others feel comfortable rather than leaders who take a top-down, directive approach.

The problem was that I was ill-prepared for this coming change he alluded to. By

chanting, I realized that quickly changing myself depended on whether I truly believed I could learn something from each of my members. If I wholeheartedly had faith that I could learn from them, I could become a better listener, become more caring, be more responsive to their hopes, desires and sufferings and create better relationships with them. This remains an ongoing challenge for me.

At times, I envision my new role to be getting out of the way so that enthusiastic newer members can “own,” or have a vested interest in, their activities. Some people tell me that they see the leader’s new role as empowering or entrusting the members. I feel this is an important aspect of being a disciple — letting others grow and try out their new ideas.

For me, putting the mentor–disciple relationship into practice is the question of whether I can fundamentally change myself in front of the Gohonzon as new circumstances in life emerge and evolve. Changing myself is the bottom line. The mentor–disciple relationship is a lifetime process of changing yourself — what your life is like at the end is the result of this.

I do not see this process of changing myself as any different from the valiant struggles and victories that I read in our publications. The children’s experiences, for instance, which are simple and sincere, force me to make a staggering assessment of my adult practice. Their experiences always remind me of the *Child With a Rice Ball* photo that I viewed as a new member — which remains as a catalyst in my lifetime mentor–disciple process.

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