

Perspective on Mentor and Disciple: Coming Home Again
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Buddhism teaches the way of mentor and disciple, and our fundamental practice of Buddhism is inextricably linked with this way of life. “Once you appreciate the inspiration and potential for growth inherent in the true bonds of mentor and disciple,” SGI President Ikeda tells us, “the amount of strength you can tap, the amount of wisdom and compassion that will well forth from your life, is immeasurable. Strength, courage and responsibility all flow from this” (*A Conversation With Youth*, p. 73).

As we attempt to demystify the tangled puzzle our Generation X represents, one overriding concern surfaces — the waning luster of family values. A deeply troubling aspect that has touched many of us lies in the fact that we can’t, as Thomas Wolfe put it, “go home again.” The divorce rate and rising number of single-parent families has made the concept of a homestead virtually extinct. Even in instances where the family unit is not re-configured by divorce, it is rare that one’s family remains in the place where one grew up.

In short, young people are being edged out into the “real” world at an early age, often unprepared to take responsibility and largely without a set of intrinsic values that might serve in guiding us. Without this preparation, we youth find ourselves in a wholly unknown experience that is not always helpful to our growth. We may experience a sense of loss or deprivation, regret or resentment at having been somehow forced to abandon our only known sense of security — and to grow up alone.

As we move off into college dorms or roommate situations abroad or to live with relatives, the sense that we can’t go home can instill a pervasive unease to our newfound freedoms. This nomadic life in our late teens and early 20s can foster a sense of profound loss that perpetuates itself in our adopting “beliefs” about ourselves and our relationships with others that are incomplete and rooted in a search for lost security. And this can raise the stakes in our lives to disproportionate heights that work at odds with our understanding of the world.

For example, the idea of success, instead of taking the form of a long-cherished dream coming to fruition through the journey of living and working toward successive goals becomes a mandate for our very survival. If you fail, you’re on your own. You can’t come home again. Failure then becomes something to be feared and shunned at all costs. It can no longer be viewed from the perspective of one leg of a substantial journey unfolding but only as a harsh test to the fragile or undeveloped self.

Success becomes measured by status, which is given the power to uplift or destroy indiscriminately. No wonder so many young people have already adopted a hard outer shell — a false identity or rough exterior to protect ourselves from failure. We may see the road ahead but only as fraught with potential defeats from which no one will be on hand to pick us up. Dust us off. Set us back on the right track. We feel incapable of surmounting the odds.

Where, then, are we to gain the wisdom, the courage and foresight? The correct perspective we sorely need? Where can we access the sense of true security and well-being we need to pursue our dreams and overcome our anxieties? The security that many of us will continue to find lacking in our homes or immediate environments?

I can only believe that the answer lies within. In our hearts, we must — even if only half believing it at first — fuel the desire to seek out our mentors and become disciples. With this kind of purposeful desire within, there is no doubt that such a person, such a teacher,

parent, relative, friend or coach will appear at the crucial time.

Soka Gakkai Vice Study Department Chief Takanori Endo tells us in “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra”:

The earnestness and vigor of the disciples’ vow are expressed by the famous line “to roar the lion’s roar” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 193). Nichiren Daishonin explains ... “The ‘roar’ [of the lion] is the sound of mentor and disciples chanting [daimoku] in unison” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 748). (*August Living Buddhism*, p. 37)

This spoke deeply to me. How many times have I heard messages from President Ikeda with the moving passage “I am chanting daimoku for your health, for your happiness”? Understanding this as the “roar” of which Nichiren Daishonin speaks revealed to me again how immense is the bond between mentor and disciple. Daimoku thus allows us to establish a profound connection with our mentor. We can experience the oneness of mentor and disciple this way even though our mentor may be far away. If our hearts are cherishing the encounter, and our voices through our daimoku are expressing what our hearts feel, then the connection between our mentor and ourselves will be vibrant, powerful and limitless. It will provide new hope and courage to challenge whatever we may be facing.

This rip-cord connection cannot, however, be achieved without the “earnestness and vigor” of the disciple. We must be the ones to actively seek out this connection. We must be the ones to freely initiate this connection. Why? “To ‘initiate’ is to take positive action,” says President Ikeda in the same dialogue. “This is entirely different from doing something because someone had told you to; such a passive practice has nothing to do with ‘the lion’s roar’... the mentor ‘roars’ but then it is up to the disciple to ‘roar’ in response” (p. 37).

So at the heart of the mentor–disciple relationship, I believe, is comradeship, a like-minded purpose that unites mentor and disciple in a single pursuit. Each gaining strength from the other.

But the beauty and purity of this bond could not be maintained if the mentor had to nag or force the disciple to live up to his or her end of the relationship. Or if the disciple complained about or abandoned the mentor. For instance, it would be of no value to the disciple to berate the mentor: “I’m not feeling inspired by you today” or “You need to pay more attention to me, I don’t feel hopeful.” These are silly exaggerations, of course, but how many times, in our heart of hearts do we actually harbor these kinds of feelings? Enough times, I believe, to convince ourselves that the way of mentor and disciple is beyond our capacity.

It is in those moments, at those times, though, that we have the opportunity to open our lives even more and deepen our faith — because our faith in others must begin with our faith in ourselves. One builds the other, and together, they become the foundation of a truly large life. This always requires efforts, a conscious move in the direction of one’s happiness. Our resolve to roar in response will determine our true success.

The heart of the disciple can always reach out to that of the mentor. And in this way, no matter how far apart they may be physically, each can always come home again.

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