

TEMPLE ISSUE: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS HOW IS THE MENTOR-AND-DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP TAUGHT DIFFERENTLY IN THE SGI AND THE TEMPLE?

BY JEFF FARR, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Nichiren Daishonin uses this quote from Shak-yamuni to express how the relationship of mentor and disciple should be: “At the start I pledged to make all people perfectly equal to me, without any distinction between us” (“Letter to Niike,” *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 259). In other words, mentor and disciple are essentially equal; equality is the core of this relationship.

The Daishonin put this into practice, treating his followers as his equals and even encouraging them to become greater than him. In “The Unity of Husband and Wife,” he shares that “the Buddha surely considers anyone in this world who embraces the Lotus Sutra, whether men or women, monk or nun, to be the lord of all living beings...” (MW-5, 156).

Nichiren Shoshu, though, teaches that mentor and disciple are not equal; priests are thought to be mentors superior to lay believers. The priesthood claims that “an absolute difference between priest and layperson exists in the lineage of the master and disciple” (*Dai-Nichiren Special Edition III*, pp. 1–18). “To talk about the priesthood and the laity with a sense of equality is an expression of great conceit,” states Nichijun Fujimoto, Nichiren Shoshu’s general administrator.

The high priest, especially, is portrayed by the priesthood as intrinsically superior to all believers. He’s called the “Daishonin of modern times” to convey a sense of supreme authority. The priesthood urges us in Refuting the Soka Gakkai’s “Counterfeit Object of Worship” to “completely follow the Way of Master and Disciple to realize our road to Buddhahood. For us, to proceed to the original Master of all mankind means that we must faithfully follow the guidance of the High Priest, the general head priest” (p. 9). To follow him, believers must adhere to the erroneous teaching that they are inferior.

All of this is in opposition to the true mentor-and-disciple relationship. Blindly following someone because of his or her position has nothing to do with this Buddhism.

This relationship comes from the heart—both the mentor’s heart and the disciple’s. This relationship is based on a mutual determination, a shared responsibility, for achieving kosen-rufu. Likewise, it is through this relationship that kosen-rufu continues. In “Admonitions Against Slander,” the Daishonin warns us that “both master and disciple will surely fall into the hell of incessant suffering if they see enemies of the Lotus Sutra and fail to reproach them” (MW-1, 165). It’s interesting how he emphasizes both. The teachings of the Lotus Sutra cannot be protected and cannot be spread without the dedication of both parties, he writes.

Each of us has a responsibility for kosen-rufu, then, as great as anyone’s. Our organization has upheld this understanding since its inception—we’re all equals in the realm of kosen-rufu. We’re all seeking together the Daishonin’s teachings and how to implement them in today’s society.

SGI President Ikeda writes that “practitioners of the Mystic Law work together in the unity of ‘many in body and one in mind’ (*itai doshin*). All are equal. For this reason, Buddhism is a teaching of mentor and disciple, expounding as it does the oneness of the

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Buddha (mentor) and living beings (disciples). The Lotus Sutra is a great path that provides the underpinnings for the solemn principle of mentor and disciple—a path that, when this principle is faithfully followed, leads to our eternal development as human beings” (June 25 *World Tribune*, p. 7).

Because the presidents of the Soka Gakkai have always maintained this spirit, they have won the people’s respect and are regarded as great mentors by millions worldwide. They have led the way in putting the Daishonin’s ideas into action. It was due to President Ikeda’s leadership and guidance, for instance, that SGI members, in a relatively short amount of time, actualized the Daishonin’s dream of this Buddhism reaching every corner of the world (see this week’s installment of “Record of My Life,” p. 5).

Like presidents Makiguchi and Toda before him, President Ikeda has worked hard to create an atmosphere of equality in our organization, to make the SGI a place where ordinary people are most highly praised. The mentor-and-disciple relationship, he has shown us, is ultimately the deepest kind of friendship found in humanity. Again and again, he has directed us back to the Daishonin’s adherence to human equality and reminded us that kosen-rufu, in the Daishonin’s mind, is up to each of us. The SGI president has told the youth division members: “All of you are presidents of the Soka Gakkai. Please advance with this awareness” (April 17, 1998, *World Tribune*, p. 10).

Again, if equality is not the starting point of the mentor-and-disciple relationship, there is no kosen-rufu. The Daishonin expresses this in “The Eight Winds,” saying, “If mentor and disciple pray with differing minds, their prayer will be as futile as trying to kindle a fire on water” (MW-1, 206). The same heart or mind—this is what it takes for the mentor-and-disciple relationship to work. Real equality—this is what it takes for kosen-rufu to happen.

“We are all human beings,” President Ikeda says, “all of us just ordinary people. Buddhism is based on the principle that everyone is equal. Fellow members reaching out to one another in friendship, linked arm in arm, eager to talk with one another and to have enjoyable activities—this, I believe, is what SGI meetings should be like” (May 21 *World Tribune*, p. 8). This is also what the true mentor-and-disciple relationship is like.

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