

**PERSPECTIVE
DISCIPLES ARE SUCCESSORS
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“This is the era of youth. Youth do not depend on anyone. Nor do they hang on someone else’s coattails. ‘I will open the way forward myself. I will advance kosen-rufu. I will see to it that the SGI is victorious.’ This is the spirit of youth and the attitude of true successors who love and cherish the SGI.”

—Daisaku Ikeda (*Faith into Action*, pp. 69–70)

I believe we could substitute the word *successors* for the word *disciple* since historically, all the mentors at one time were disciples. Additionally, I feel *successor* is probably a better word to use than *disciple*, because the word *disciple* often implies a subservient role and usually refers to people who in this lifetime will never attain the status of mentor.

For example, there are the disciples of Christ (usually the first or second definition of disciple in dictionaries) or the disciples of a Zen master, or the disciples of Nikken, a master who must be blindly obeyed and worshipped.

In SGI, the disciples never prostrate themselves before the mentor. Instead we wave to SGI President Ikeda and he waves back. He chants for our health and well-being, and we chant for his. It is a very human bond.

President Ikeda points out in *Learning from the Gosho*: “Ultimately, Buddhism comes down to the person. I did not wait to place my trust in President Toda until after I had learned about the Daishonin’s teachings. Rather, I came to trust Buddhism because I first believed in the person, Josei Toda” (p. 34).

I have always been impressed by the very human interaction between Nichiren Daishonin and his followers. As we see from “The Gift of the Unlined Robe,” the Daishonin talks very openly about his poor health and living conditions. We know that at times he was reduced to eating snow, grass or tree bark to survive, and that one winter his hut on Mount Minobu collapsed and his kimono was frozen solid like the wings of some poor bird.

The mentor, Nichiren Daishonin, shares his life so that we will develop the same determination to strive for kosen-rufu that he has. Nichiren Daishonin is constantly pointing to his humanity, so that we will understand that we share the same potential to become a Buddha that he does. He has no pretense.

Nichiren Daishonin was willing to struggle alongside his disciples. In the letter “The Supremacy of the Law,” to Nichimyo he says, “If anything at all happens, please come over here [to Mount Minobu]. I will welcome you. Let us die of starvation together among the mountains” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 612).

The idea that disciples are somehow subservient is a bit misleading. The disciple/successor puts forth full effort alongside the mentor in his or her own way, fiercely seeking the truth, fighting the internal and external devils every step of the way. Nikko was propagating the Law in Kamakura while Nichiren encouraged individual disciples through letters, dialogue and lectures on Mount Minobu.

While first Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi gave lectures, Josei Toda, the disciple/successor, sat in the back of the lectures often joking or playing Go to offset Makiguchi’s strictness with warmth, thus in his own way balancing out Makiguchi.

Similarly, Daisaku Ikeda established the brass band, went to outlying areas like Kansai and Kamata chapters and in general supported second Soka Gakkai president, Josei Toda, in his own unique way, breaking new kosen-rufu ground every step of the way.

And now we, as disciples/successors, are encouraged by President Ikeda to strive for kosen-rufu in our own unique arena, in the way the best suits us, but with a burning resolve.

I think determination is one of the most important aspects of the mentor–successor relationship. I often fall victim to the thoughts of, “What will people think? Is this okay? How do I know I won’t lead people astray?” Then I end up retreating and second-guessing myself. But I know when I chant with the same spirit of Nichiren Daishonin — for the happiness of others — I have the courage and focus to follow through.

What other people think is irrelevant in the end. What matters is whether I have the passion of heart to make kosen-rufu a matter of course. Am I really racking my brains to open a path for others’ happiness?

Recently, Norimasa Saito, SGI North America Bureau director, pointed out that being from America makes us uniquely suited not only for understanding both the Soka Spirit movement but the mentor–successor relationship. America was founded by people who fought against religious authority — people who believed that everyone has an equal right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This is exactly what we are fighting for in the Soka Spirit movement; everyone has the same Buddha nature.

Americans have a natural spirit of independence and also an incredible concern and compassion for those who are suffering. No big surprise since President Ikeda says you have to be strong to be compassionate.