

UNDERSTANDING THE MENTOR-DISCIPLE RELATIONSHIP SGI-USA ZONE YOUTH LEADERS SHARE IMPRESSIONS

The following are impressions from selected SGI-USA youth zone leaders from around the United States about the mentor–disciple relationship and how it became relevant to their lives.

Matt Anton, Northeastern Zone Youth Leader

I think most Americans share a healthy distrust of leaders and leadership. Every time a leading political, religious or cultural figure is involved in scandal, our suspicions are deepened. Many leaders are considered corrupt, and this sense of skepticism extends to how we view leadership within the SGI organization. It's very difficult for us to believe that SGI President Ikeda is what he appears to be—a man completely committed to building a culture of peace on a global scale. In the back of our minds, we might have the nagging thought, “Yeah, but what's in it for him?”

However, seeing is believing. A particular turning point for me occurred during a dynamic culture festival held in Hawaii in 1985. Never before had I seen so many people unite for the cause of peace. And the man whose guidance and encouragement had made it possible was President Ikeda. Every time I participate in an SGI activity, my sense of profound respect and deep admiration for the efforts of President Ikeda grow stronger and stronger. I am proud to call President Ikeda my mentor.

Joe Baykun, Western Zone Youth Leader

What was my turning point in the mentor–disciple relationship? There was no grand epiphany that occurred amidst lightning bolts and earthquakes. My relationship gradually evolved out of a desire to be happy.

My practice began amidst the hectic rhythm of activities in the '80s. My sponsor, an eccentric, artist friend, carried something in his heart—something profound and unshakable that managed to provide an anchor of sanity for me. It was his desire to reply to President Ikeda. No matter how absurd the times, his actions and life always conveyed the deeper message of this philosophy.

The hope and desire for human happiness that burned in my friend's heart slowly began to rekindle that same forgotten dream in my own. And the source of his undying commitment was the trust he had in Daisaku Ikeda. It was his action and care for us, and his ceaseless devotion to President Ikeda that awakened a desire in me to know more about my mentor.

There are many moments in my life that helped define and strengthen my relationship to President Ikeda. It is definitely the behavior of his disciples and their commitment to human happiness that makes this relationship real.

Beth Lamure, Southern California Zone Youth Leader

The mentor–disciple relationship has made such a difference in my life and in the way I practice and view Buddhism. It has been the single most thing that has brought me the greatest joy and benefit in my practice. It has also been by far the most difficult part of Buddhism for me to grasp. To say it pushed all my buttons and made me want

to run out of a room whenever it was mentioned is still putting it mildly. But what is it exactly? Is the mentor–disciple relationship something separate from President Ikeda? To understand mentor-and-disciple, do we also have to understand President Ikeda?

That was my toughest part. I could deal with having a mentor in life or understanding that I could learn something from someone, but when it came to President Ikeda, that was where the real struggle was for me. I chanted often about it and asked many questions about him. I studied his lectures, poems, dialogues and books. I came to my own conclusion that he is a truly great man who has lived an unimaginably courageous life. After much contemplation and struggle, I realized that I would be truly fortunate to have him as my mentor in life. It is an ongoing process to deepen my understanding of the mentor–disciple relationship and President Ikeda but a process that I now truly enjoy!

David Eisenberg, Northern California Zone Youth Leader

I have practiced this Buddhism for almost 20 years now, but the point where I really began to understand the mentor–disciple relationship was in 1993, when President Ikeda visited San Francisco.

One night, a special event was planned for him at the house where he was staying. The idea was that his car would arrive and he'd immediately be able to enjoy our performance. Instead of going along with the program, President Ikeda turned around and walked over to me. I had been having a very long week and didn't have the highest life-condition at that moment. He took my hand in his and looked at me in the most reassuring way imaginable. I felt I had no need to worry!

I learned at that moment that a true leader, a true Bodhisattva of the Earth, cares much more for others than for his or her own pleasure. President Ikeda is the one person who shows me 100 percent of the time what it means to be a Buddhist. Because he is teaching me how to live my life to the fullest, I have chosen him as my mentor.

Osamu Kaneko, Central Zone Youth Leader

In 1991, after four years of practice, I made a huge mistake that made me lose confidence in myself. I was almost suicidal because I was not sure of the value of my life. I cried and cried, but finally managed to drag myself in front of the Gohonzon. I never felt such tremendous difficulty to chant even one time.

The fundamental darkness in my life prevented me from chanting. I said myself, "If I cannot chant now, I will never be able to face the Gohonzon for the rest of my life." I forced myself to chant until it became a rhythm. After forcing myself for 15 minutes or so, I then started feeling like I didn't want to stop chanting until I found the answer to why I had to struggle so much.

I finally realized how arrogant I was in making the mistake I had. I realized that if I had followed President Ikeda's guidance sincerely without my biased interpretation, I would never have made such a mistake. I had thought I understood what the mentor–disciple relationship means, but I didn't understand at all. I felt so ashamed, but afterward, I felt the strongest desire to find an answer so that I would not suffer again.

As I was chanting, I awakened to the fact that I need a role model, someone that

I follow to lead me to a higher state of life. I wondered, “Who in this world is leading a life without regret and with a full sense of mission, justice and joy?” I could not think of anyone but President Ikeda. Tremendous joy welled up from my heart and I thought how fortunate I am to have a mentor like President Ikeda.

I pledged to the Gohonzon that I would follow his example. I found that the genuine mentor–disciple relationship lies in challenging myself to actualize each encouragement that my mentor puts out for me. With President Ikeda, I can win. I am convinced of it.

Keli McHale, Mid-Atlantic Zone Youth Leader

In June 2000 at the Young Women’s Conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, my life experiences became clear to me. The mentor–disciple relationship came alive in my own life! I realized that because I didn’t believe in my own life as a Buddha, I had a big block to understanding this relationship. If I couldn’t believe in myself, how could I muster up confidence in my life to challenge the grand vision of taking full responsibility for world peace?

Last September, while attending the SGI Fall Youth Training Course, I was able to report to President Ikeda my 10-year struggle of finally believing in my life—never to doubt my life, no matter what! While I was seeking to understand the mentor–disciple relationship, I realized I was looking outside myself for the answers to questions I had about my life, trying to compare myself to someone else or trying to be something I was not. This year, I have made my promise to President Ikeda to shoulder full responsibility of our wonderful legacy to the best of my ability.

Cathy Kishi, Pacific Zone Youth Leader

As a teenager, I sought out the correct way to live. When I was 16 years old and going through a personal struggle, I was told there would be a culture festival and that President Ikeda would be there. I didn’t care to attend any meetings, but I really wanted to meet the person many affectionately called “Sensei.” Through seeking him, I was able to learn more about this practice, meet new friends who truly cared for my happiness and experience a sense of joy that overflowed from within my heart.

Because of President Ikeda, I have continued my practice. Whenever I feel discouraged, I read his guidance. This gives me the hope and energy to continue my practice and challenge my difficulties.

I still don’t really understand the full significance of the mentor–disciple relationship. I think it is something we have to strive for our whole lives. Recently SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima shared that the greatest freedom we have as human beings is being able to choose our own mentor. With appreciation to be a youth member during such a significant time in history and advance forward with President Ikeda, I will strive to do my best.