

**UNDERSTANDING MENTOR AND DISCIPLE**  
**If Everyone's Equal, Why Do We Need a Mentor?**  
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When I was in high school, my English teacher always guided me, encouraged me and corrected my mistakes. She once said, "Keep up the good work and continue to study hard." I feel very grateful to her; this experience was instrumental in leading me to seek a mentor in life.

Buddhism emphasizes the oneness of mentor and disciple. SGI President Ikeda explains this in *The New Human Revolution* with the relationship of Hironori Kawanaka, a Kyushu leader, and Shin'ichi Yamamoto:

[Kawanaka] modeled his behavior after that of Shin'ichi, whom he looked up to as his mentor; in any situation, he would ask himself what Shin'ichi would do if Shin'ichi were in his place. In other words, he did not stand looking toward his mentor, thinking of himself as one of the crowd; he instead strove to live side by side with his mentor, facing the same direction in which his mentor's gaze was focused. (vol. 4, chapter 3)

Of course, the oneness of mentor and disciple doesn't mean that the disciple merely copies the mentor. Rather, the disciple takes action with a deep understanding of the mentor's intention. The Soka Gakkai was established based on this spirit of the oneness of mentor and disciple. Josei Toda, the second Soka Gakkai president, was President Makiguchi's young disciple when the Soka Gakkai was founded in 1930. I have no doubt the reason the SGI organization now has members in 128 countries is because President Ikeda firmly inherited the vision of his mentor, Josei Toda.

As I said, I was determined to seek a mentor in life, someone who could guide me and tell me how to live a happy life, how to fear no obstacles. I was introduced to this Buddhism in 1989. Although I heard President Ikeda's name mentioned many times at meetings, it wasn't until I began reading his guidance in the publications that I affirmed for myself that I had found my mentor in life.

Although I have not met President Ikeda in person, he seems to always be with me. Reading his guidance in the *World Tribune* or *Living Buddhism* is like reading a letter addressed to me personally. These "letters" encourage me and give me hope; I try to follow his guidance and put it into practice in my daily life.

I came to the United States from Malaysia to go to school here, receiving my undergraduate degree in economics from Washington State University in the summer of 1995. I wanted to go on to graduate school, but I only had enough money to last one semester. The only way I could continue going to school after that was if I received an assistantship. So I began graduate school at Washington State without an assistantship, using up the last of my money. At the same time, I sent out applications to 12 other universities, hoping to get an assistantship at one of them.

This was a very difficult time for me. I really wanted to stay in the United States and continue my education, so I devoted more time to chanting. I read President Ikeda's guidance with a renewed sense of passion as a disciple. Then something very fortunate for me happened: My department offered me one semester of assistantship, which meant I didn't have to pay anything for that semester. Nevertheless, my goal was to get into another university. I received replies to the 12 I applied to, but in every case, I was either rejected or not offered an assistantship. My life condition was so low. My feelings were hurt something awful.

But I kept chanting daimoku and studying President Ikeda's guidance. In *The New Human Revolution*, vol. 2, President Ikeda writes: "When people actually make effort to

accomplish something, they will often be confronted by a situation or difficulties they never anticipated. Yet, such real experience is priceless toward developing genuine ability.” On another occasion, President Ikeda said, “The key to victory is to conquer one’s inner weakness.” Following these words of encouragement, I began to fight against my inner weakness. I learned not to give up in any endeavor. The result was that Washington State University renewed my assistantship — I will finish graduate school without paying anything! I have to express my gratitude for this Buddhism, and a millionfold appreciation to President Ikeda, who is always guiding and helping me.

In Buddhism, everyone is equal. So why do we need a mentor? The oneness of mentor and disciple explains this. Let’s use an analogy for it: the roots of a plant and the nutrients they absorb. To deepen our roots of faith, we must absorb nutrients (chanting, studying the Gosho, reading President Ikeda’s guidance). The plant of our lives will bear beautiful fruit when it absorbs these nutrients. If we stop supplying nutrients to the roots, though, the plant will wither and be uprooted by a strong wind.

In soccer, teams often have a player/coach, who is the manager of the team as well as a player on the team. To win a match, the other team players must be well-trained by the mentor and learn from him or her.

Mentor and disciple work together, each with his or her own role in winning the match; disciples completely share the responsibility with their mentor.

So what I have learned is that the flower of kosen-rufu will blossom as the strength of the oneness of mentor and disciple expands.

I am very happy that I have found a mentor in life.

**WT**