

## Understanding Mentor and Disciple: It's Your Choice

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I believe that for us to develop a mentor–disciple relationship, the first thing that must exist is a sense of trust in the mentor. For that relationship to have value, the disciple must have more than merely a blind trust in the mentor. Instead, it should be a trust established through the mentor's proven behavior. In other words, it is through observing the behavior of an individual that we can determine whether he or she is someone we want to learn from and emulate.

Being a disciple of SGI President Ikeda is a choice that we, as individuals, can make in different ways. Ultimately, it's a choice over whether to trust him. Through our study of his speeches and dialogues, and by implementing them in our lives, we are behaving as disciples.

We develop our personal sense of what it means to be a disciple as our trust grows — as we begin to cherish the same innermost desire or dream as our mentor. In *The New Human Revolution* (vol. 6, chapter 2), President Ikeda writes, “Disciples of such great teachers always stand up to carry on their teachers' work.”

The depth of this type of trust is exhibited not only within the SGI. Recently, in his recollections of a meeting with Dr. B.N. Pande, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, President Ikeda stated:

I understand Dr. Pande's feelings; his pride and joy is to live his life exactly as his mentor taught him.... When a mentor and disciple are united in spirit, unbelievable courage, strength and compassion emanate from their lives.... Through the person of Dr. Pande, who embodies his mentor's spirit, Gandhi still speaks to us today.... As Gandhi's disciple, he would not let his mentor's cry fade, but he would continue to fight, keeping his message alive until the last day of life. (June 1997 *Living Buddhism*, p. 38)

I have not had the opportunity to meet with Mr. Ikeda one on one. But like many, I have heard anecdotes about the SGI president's behavior from others who have met him. He shows the greatest respect to all whom he meets, bringing forth joy all around him. Because of his example, I have found myself increasing the quality of my day-to-day interactions with people in my life. Once painfully shy, I now talk with perfect strangers with a desire to bring hope and joy to their lives. Were it not for President Ikeda's example, for the trust I have placed in him, I don't know if I would have learned to stretch myself.

In some ways, a mentor is like a parent. The job of a parent is to teach his or her child how to live. Today it is widely agreed that what has the greatest impact on children are the examples around them. Children emulate what they see and hear, and not necessarily what they are told. For instance, my 2-year-old did not hesitate to share an expletive immediately upon finding her baby sister had spilled the incense ashes from our Buddhist altar the other day. But I can also share with pride her expressions of concern for the welfare and happiness of others around her. I'll take some credit for both. (She does, after all, have two parents to emulate.)

I firmly believe it is the behavior of parents that has the most impact on how a child will behave throughout his or her life. And I can think of no greater example in faith, no greater “parent” in faith, to emulate than President Ikeda.

In one sense, we are all mentors in that we teach others about this Buddhism and encourage those who already practice. Again, our example is of the utmost importance —

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no one will be encouraged to join or continue practicing if we are not enjoying our lives and showing proof of this practice. As Nichiren Daishonin says, “The real meaning of Shakyamuni Buddha’s appearance in this world lay in his behavior as a human being” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 240). It all comes down to our behavior.

Our efforts to teach others about the greatness of the Law are, I believe, what qualify us to be called mentors or disciples. It’s not that we *must* be disciples of President Ikeda to practice Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. Rather, it is holding the same dream of teaching the Law to others and eradicating their suffering that naturally binds us together as disciples of President Ikeda.

Another of the wondrous things I’ve begun to discover in my life through this relationship is that often when I chant about something in particular, the answer clearly appears to me from within President Ikeda’s writings. So many times I am struck by the direct relevance of what he has written to what is occurring in my life. I like to think that as a disciple, these kinds of experiences are a manifestation of the connection I am creating between my life and President Ikeda’s.

As my understanding of Buddhism has deepened through the years, I have slowly begun to understand the profundity of this mentor-and-disciple relationship. In our continuous effort to self-reflect, polish our lives and enrich the lives of those around us, each of us can be qualified to say, “I am a disciple.” Only when many people stand up and act as disciples can we be assured that our movement for world peace will continue on into the future. And it all starts with trust.

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