

Understanding Mentor and Disciple: It Takes Faith
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I have to admit that I have found the relationship between President Toda and SGI President Ikeda difficult to understand. It seems unique, or at the least very rare. Western culture has few if any precedents for this kind of relationship, especially in the sphere of religion. In the realm of the arts or literature, the mentor–disciple relationship works quite differently: The disciple studies with the mentor and seeks to learn the basics from the mentor, but with the ultimate objective of breaking out on his or her own — not of fulfilling the mentor’s desires as if they were the disciple’s own.

It’s my impression that the basis of the idea of mentoring in the West is to have the disciple forge his or her own way. Disciples in the arts, for instance, who don’t ultimately go out on their own path are labeled “derivative” simply because they have never succeeded in breaking out from under the mentor’s way of expressing how to look at the world. Speaking for myself, I have no frame of reference for the kind of bond Toda and Ikeda shared.

Remember how it comes about in their very first meeting: The 19-year-old Shin’ichi Yamamoto (the fictional counterpart of Mr. Ikeda in the novel *The Human Revolution*) goes to his first discussion meeting, and Toda is there. After asking some questions of Toda, Shin’ichi thinks to himself: “How succinctly he answers! There is no confusion in him. I think I can believe and follow this man. He answered my questions politely and sincerely, without any superfluity. What will this man mean in my life?”

How many of us have ever even come close to meeting someone, anyone, for the first time and feeling “This is someone I can follow for the rest of my life”? Very few of us would be my guess.

Even harder to fathom than the beginning of their relationship, however, is how it continues. In the course of *The Human Revolution*, we never see Shin’ichi asking “Why?” to any of Toda’s directions or guidance. Rather, his response is “How?” How can he make it happen? How can he ensure that Toda’s direction is fulfilled?

This probably would not have been our response, if we are truthful with ourselves. Don’t most of us, when we hear a direction or guidance, want to know “Why do I have to do that?” or “Why should I?”

Look at how different President Ikeda’s response has been. In a recent speech, he said: “Since the age of 19, I have followed the guidance of my mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, and single-mindedly dedicated my life to kosen-rufu. Therefore, I am confident that in lifetime after lifetime I will enjoy a state of life pervaded by inexhaustible good fortune and benefit” (July 11 *World Tribune*, p. 14).

In looking at why I have been resistant to the mentor–disciple relationship for so long, I think another reason is that I still have a residue of feeling from the 1970s and ’80s when it was described as the *master*–disciple relationship in the organization. The constant emphasis on and total reference to one man having all the answers created something of a backlash in my mind, which has still not entirely subsided.

Another reason for my problems with mentor–disciple is, to be perfectly honest, plain ego. Who knows? This may be the biggest reason of all — this feeling that I’ll find the answers myself.

So these are just the main obstacles I have had to come to terms with in trying to understand mentor–disciple for myself. Judging by conversations I’ve had with members over the years, I am hardly unique.

What then have I learned to take me beyond this point? Most basically, I think we have to understand that mentor–disciple in Buddhism demands a different approach than anything we may have previously encountered in this area — it has to be based on faith.

In one sense, this is very akin to the difference between Western deductive and Eastern inductive thinking that we first encounter when we meet the Gohonzon. We are told the Gohonzon is the embodiment of the perfect universal law and the cluster of benefits — but that it is up to each of us to find this out for ourselves. It is not like deducing a scientific law, say, through a series of experiments. No, instead we have the law at the outset and have to find out why this law is true, and how we can make its power work for us.

With the mentor–disciple relationship as shown in the case of Mr. Toda and Mr. Ikeda, the same understanding pertains. Mr. Ikeda had faith that Mr. Toda’s understanding of life and Buddhism was such that if he followed Toda as a mentor then the truth about life would be laid open for him. By following his mentor closely and explicitly, Mr. Ikeda proved the validity of his initial leap of faith. And, as he has said so often, everything he has accomplished in the long years of his practice has been nothing but carrying out Toda’s will and vision for kosen-rufu. It becomes clear, then, that we have to make a leap of faith if we are to start to understand the mentor–disciple relationship and the benefits that can flow from it.

I don’t think it is necessary to believe that we have to replicate President Ikeda’s experience. I can see now that thinking I had to have the same kind of instantaneousness as he did was really a trick that my mind played on me all these years — a kind of red herring, if you will. Rather than thinking you have to be hit with a flash of lightning to truly be a disciple, I think the important thing is just to fight to understand what the mentor is saying, and how you can make this a source of benefit for your life. You have to fight for it.

I saw this recently so clearly in the life of a member in my headquarters. He read something in President Ikeda’s writings about education and the United Nations. Specific ideas about how to implement the much more general idea President Ikeda articulated started to take shape in his mind. He began to chant about how these ideas could be brought to fruition and what he would have to do to make them a reality. The vision that President Ikeda gave him was by his own admission something larger than anything he could have fashioned for himself. Yet here he was fighting with passion and imagination to fulfill this dream and getting closer to it all the time! (Not so surprisingly, perhaps, I encountered this member’s dream just when I started to press myself about the listlessness of my passion for the mentor–disciple relationship.)

It is not that we are to follow President Ikeda blindly. But we know how much he has accomplished and the depth of his wisdom. In his writings we find innumerable ideas and visions expressed.

Our mission as disciples, if you will, is to find one or two or more of these ideas or visions to make our own. And, by fighting to make them a reality through faith, to propel our lives into areas they never would have discovered otherwise.

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