

**TONY GOODLETTE, SPRINGFIELD, VA.  
A Masterful Life**

*Abandoned by his father and filled with rage, Tony Goodlette joined the Army. After years of fighting — first in the military sense, then in his Buddhist practice — he repaired his relationship with his father. Seeking the Buddhist way of mentor and disciple helped him become worthy of respect, he says.*

SGI President Ikeda once wrote: “In life, having a mentor is a source of great joy and happiness. The deep relationship between mentor and disciple is, however, hard for other people to understand. But when you pursue the way of mentor and disciple — which you have chosen to seek out — and carry it through as the pride of your life, you can make yourself beautiful and worthy of respect as a human being.”

When I began practicing Buddhism in October 1980, I already had 20 years of experience with mentors: mentors of martial arts, Zen mentors and mentors in the form of superior officers in the Army. They did not make me worthy of respect, only of *fear*.

I sought this Buddhism to become trusted for who I am, not for who or what I represent....

My life began in a bed of roses in upstate New York, where I lived with my father, a well-known and well-to-do musician. I lived a sheltered and elite life with maids and tutors catering to my every need. One night, when I was 8 years old, my father dropped me off at a friend’s house and never returned. My whole life fell apart.

For the next nine years, I floundered between state orphanages, foster homes and relatives who used me for welfare checks.

My hurt and shock at my abandonment turned to anger and hate. I became an arrogant, belligerent person, determined to prove myself worthy and, especially, to best my father in everything I did.

I took my angry determination to an Army recruitment office. The Army indulged me by training me to become an intelligence operative. After a tour in Germany, I spent eight years in Vietnam, developing power and influence. I had *carte blanche* to do anything necessary to get the job done, with contacts ranging from the depths of the underworld to the highest echelons of government.

Although I earned a Bronze Star and other commendations, I became ruthless. I was responsible for many offenses against human life. My actions were taken in the line of duty; my behavior stemmed from hatred of my father.

While in Vietnam, I became very involved in the evacuation of that country. I had two children while I was there, and I refused to desert them as my father had deserted me. I succeeded in bringing my wife and children back to New York. I went on to Saudi Arabia, amassing great wealth in four years of contract security work.

But by 1979, I lost it all. I declared bankruptcy, my wife and I divorced, and my children lost all confidence in me. Although I found a job in Northern Virginia, I became despondent, leading to an unsuccessful suicide attempt.

A week later, I heard about Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and immediately began practicing this Buddhism.

I was encouraged by the woman running the bookstore in the Washington, D.C., Community Center to buy and read *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* and *Guidelines on Faith*. As I did, I came to realize my attitude toward my father was wrong: If it were not for him bringing me into the world, I would not have heard of Nam-myoho-

renge-kyo and received so many benefits.

Although I thought my father was dead, I began making inquiries and was surprised to find that he was not. I called him to begin the difficult task of rebuilding our relationship. Gradually, I began to see my father from a different perspective — as a sick, destitute, suffering individual rather than the father who betrayed me. I invited him to visit my home in Springfield; he accepted.

His questions about my reciting the Lotus Sutra allowed me to explain the practice of this Buddhism. I wanted him to practice, too, to relieve his suffering and enjoy the kind of benefits I was receiving.

My father became deathly ill in early 1984, while I was attending the SGI-USA Pioneers Conference in Dallas — where I met SGI President Ikeda. Immediately after the meeting, I called my father in the hospital and encouraged him to receive the Gohonzon. Somehow, the members in New York were able to take him from the hospital to do so. Rather than dying, within 90 days he was off the diabetes medication he had been taking for 25 years.

During the next year, my father spent each day telling others about Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. In his last letter to me, he said that he was happier that last year than all of his other 69 years put together. In fact, he convinced a woman to chant just hours before he died, in February 1985.

The virtue of the parent — which is explained in the Buddhist concept of the three virtues — is the power to embrace people with compassion; to protect them from harm; and to enable them to develop the ability to live under their own power. Although my father fell short of this ideal 30-some years before, his compassion in his last year of life was truly remarkable.

He became an inspiration to me.

Also, it was the death of my father that led me to my mother — whom I had never known and had long thought dead. It was left to me to bridge the gap of pain that my mother, unknown to me, had suffered due to my father.

President Ikeda once said that a vain, cowardly man is an enemy of Buddhism. I have to admit that I saw this tendency in myself. Despite several years of practice, arrogance was still a fundamental part of me. But moved by my father's example and following President Ikeda's guidance, I began to conquer it.

I feel now that I have abandoned my self-serving kind of self-reliance. I am proud to say that since I began my practice of the Daishonin's Buddhism, I've never had to fire or even draw a weapon, despite several years of being in very dangerous situations doing security. In 1989, I gave up security work altogether.

I am now a manager at a large national trade association, which recruited me to work for them. They trust me for who I am. This job gives me the time to strive for kosen-rufu alongside my fellow members in Fairfax and Springfield, including a new wife with whom I enjoy a wonderful relationship.

During the past five years, I have overcome many challenges related to my health. My mother's constant encouragement during these struggles has been like a lion's roar. I have come to know her and share with her the power of Buddhist practice and the Daishonin's teachings.

I feel a great sense of appreciation for my wife, my family, the members, my friends and my co-workers. And I am determined to continue to understand the mentor-disciple relationship, to seek President Ikeda's spirit and to care for SGI members.

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