

## **UNDERSTANDING OTHERS: WHY FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE OFTEN MISLEADING BY STEVE DOTY, WASHINGTON D.C.**

It was a Friday mid-afternoon and I was having lunch with our SGI-USA General Director. We were about an hour into our trip to the eastern coast of North Carolina to visit members when we stopped to eat. I had been obsessing. “Am I sitting up straight? Am I slouching? What should I say, am I acting normal?” All of these thoughts were running through my head as we discussed the merits of fast food and the taste of the burgers at Burger King. Of all the possible conversations I could imagine having with Mr. Zaitso, this surely wasn’t one of them!

In becoming the region leader for the newly formed Virginia/Carolina Region, I recently had an opportunity to spend a weekend traveling with General Director Zaitso. We visited members on the eastern coast of North Carolina whose homes had been damaged by hurricanes and subsequent flooding. It was a great experience to travel with and get to know Mr. Zaitso firsthand. Having been a youth region leader and a youth zone leader, I had been at various meetings with him in the past. Upon learning I would graduate from the youth division and become the new region leader, I made the determination to get to know Mr. Zaitso and develop a relationship with him. I had my own preconceived ideas about him based on seeing him at meetings such as the Central Executive Conference, leaders meetings, etc. I had concluded he was good in front of a large group of leaders, but I wasn’t so sure how he would interact with a large group of members, and I wondered how he would do in an open Q-and-A session. Would he be encouraging?

I would be traveling with him and Ian McIlraith. I preconceived in my mind how the weekend would go. The three of us would fly from Washington, D.C., to Raleigh, N.C., and get in a van and drive three hours to the eastern part of the state. I figured Mr. Zaitso would get in the back of the van, probably get some sleep due to his hectic schedule. Then Ian and I would spend the time reminiscing about our days in the youth division talking about all the friends we have in common.

I was wrong. Mr. Zaitso sat up front with me, Ian got in the back, and no, he didn’t go to sleep. Upon leaving the airport, Mr. Zaitso began asking me questions about the area where we were going, the members we would be visiting, their situations and many other questions. I told him what I knew, but on more than one occasion I responded with “I don’t know.”

I thought to myself, “This isn’t getting off to a very great start.”

Mr. Zaitso was nice in his response, saying: “That’s OK. You are a new region leader. You will learn all of these things.”

During our drive Ian and Mr. Zaitso worked on his editorial for the next issue of *Living Buddhism*. I listened to them discuss various points and kept thinking, should I be listening? I better pay attention to the road. Am I driving too fast? Is Mr. Zaitso worried about my driving? All of these wonderful thoughts screamed through my mind. Then, to my surprise, Mr. Zaitso asked Ian to read the editorial to me to see what I thought. I gave my honest opinion and thought this was a timely editorial. (Glad I had been listening!) Upon concluding their discussion, Ian phoned the *Living Buddhism* staff and discussed the changes so their deadline was met.

My impression of Mr. Zaitso was beginning to change. Or actually, I began to realize my perceptions had been wrong; from his sitting up front in the van, to the hamburger dis-

cussion and now asking for my thoughts on his editorial. In the book, *For Today and Tomorrow*, SGI President Ikeda states: “There is no other means than faith by which to open our lives and our inner state of Buddhahood. Faith is the most ‘open’ state of mind of all. Infinite clusters of good fortune will spill forth from this unbarred treasure house of life” (p. 106). I must develop this “open” state of mind.

That day we visited two families whose homes had been damaged by floods. I watched Mr. Zaitzu reach out to these families with warm words of encouragement and a request for them to ask any questions that might be troubling them. He really made himself available.

In the evening, we attended a meeting in Jacksonville, N.C., with more than 70 members in attendance. Mr. Zaitzu talked about many things, but the point that stuck in my mind is that wherever we go, we as leaders need to provide hope, courage and a sense of security to the members.

As we left, it became apparent that someone had inadvertently taken Ian’s shoes. Ian was not upset in the least as he had an extra pair with him. We then left for Raleigh where we would be staying the night. In the van, we joked about Ian losing his shoes; it was a funny and warm atmosphere. Ian’s shoes were returned the next day with a note that apologized and told Ian he was so fortunate to have such comfortable shoes!

From Raleigh, we traveled to Norfolk, Va.; this was his first visit there. Mr. Zaitzu encouraged all of the members who were taking the study exam and afterward we attended an enthusiastic meeting with over 350 members. A youth division member shared an experience about attending the Youth Grand Culture Festival in Los Angeles. He then read a very moving poem he had written. The poem is in reference to the new millennium. In the opening he poses the question: “Where will you be?” And, in the conclusion he states: “I know where I will stand/ Here with you hand in hand/ So together let’s strike, with the bold sword of courage/ At the mystery of the future/ And as youth promote the heart of peace.”

After the trip, I struggled for the two weeks trying to put into words what I wanted to say about my experience and the realizations I had. I called Mr. Zai-tzu and told him I would like to write a *World Tribune* article and perhaps call it “A Weekend with the General Director.” He told me that if I thought it would encourage the members, to go ahead. He also said he enjoyed the weekend very much and thought that perhaps he should write an article and call it “A Weekend with Steve Doty!”

What I really learned from this trip was that it is so easy to form opinions and judge others based on just seeing them at meetings. I realized how shallow my impressions of Mr. Zaitzu had been. It also became clear that it is often only by spending time with another person that I can see the richness of his or her life.

I can’t help but wonder how many members and fellow leaders, family members, co-workers and temple members I have judged without really getting to know what was in their hearts. I formed my opinion of them based on brief encounters and seldom made any efforts beyond that. In *Faith into Action*, President Ikeda states: “Those who make friends have greater opportunities for growth and self development; they make society a better place and lead happy, satisfying lives. In every situation, human relations—communication and personal interaction—are vital. We need to initiate and nurture friendships and contacts with many people, both within the organization and in society at large. Our lives will open and be enriched to the extent that we do so” (p. 221). I am determined to open

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my life by making efforts to share the uniqueness and richness of the members, their families, and their friends in the Virginia/Carolina Region as we advance our movement of peace.

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