

SIGNIFICANT DATES
WHAT AUG. 24 MEANS TO ME
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Recently, I was reading one of my favorite books by SGI President Ikeda, *My Recollections*. The book is a collection of essays about his parents, his childhood, his teenage years leading up to his meeting Josei Toda, his early days of faith and many other interesting autobiographical stories not found in other English writings. In addition to the very moving essays about his days as a teenager working in an iron factory while fighting tuberculosis, the ones that deeply touched me chronicled the evolution of his disillusionment with the war—from initial disappointment that his father would not let him enlist, to anger and desperation when his family was bombed out of his aunt's house and forced to live in a shack. It was a time, as he describes, when people intensely felt both spiritual desolation and material deprivation.

He describes his emerging antiwar attitude in the following passage: “War's ruthlessness had hit our family like a tidal wave, smashing everything. I had unawares started questioning the meaninglessness of war. Why fight this war anyhow? The tragedy of war had touched me incisively, and I began to find fault with it from that moment on” (pp. 38–39).

In spite of his disillusionment, the fundamental optimism in young Daisaku Ikeda's heart was desperately seeking to find a way to break through the despair that was so common at that time. He writes: “As long as we could remember, my generation had been steeped in a nationalism which regarded the Emperor as absolute, but now we realized that everything we had valued was valueless. Still, we burned with more than enough courage to think we could start afresh from scratch” (p. 52).

It was at this time that a friend from his grade school days stopped by and invited him to a meeting about “life philosophy.” On Aug. 14, 1947, he attended his first meeting on Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. He describes the scene: “It was after eight as we walked down the gloomy road without a single streetlight. When we arrived and went into the house we found about 20 people gathered. My attention was especially attracted by a man in his forties who talked with a somewhat husky but carefree voice. His broad forehead stood out and his eyes sparkled behind thick lenses. The atmosphere in the group tingled with a strange vigor. As we listened to his unrestrained and frank talk, even weary minds were stimulated. He had the power to make our thoughts radiate! This individual was Josei Toda, the man who determined the course of my life and became my mentor” (pp. 52–53).

At that meeting, Mr. Toda responded to young Daisaku's questions. The point that really struck me here is his reaction: “I thought, this is it—what he's saying is true! I figured, here's a man I can put my faith in. Despite the feeling that I couldn't trust anything, due perhaps to the fact that everything had changed so drastically in my life, I still had the urge to search for something to believe in” (p. 54). And, on Aug. 24, 10 days later, he received the Gohonzon.

Of course, Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism teaches us to follow the Law and not the person. This means that we should practice exactly as taught by Nichiren Daishonin. It also necessitates a mentor in life who can show us how to put into practice what the Law teaches and to bring it from the realm of theory and philosophy into enabling us to create actual value and breakthroughs in our own lives.

Examples of great mentors are all around us. In sports, we have seen again and again how coaches have transformed a team of the same players from losers into winners because they've helped them believe in themselves. The reason the players could believe in themselves is because they trusted that the coaches knew how to win and that if they could learn from them, they too could win.

Young Daisaku's decision to make Mr. Toda his mentor—to feel that this was a person he could trust and his lifelong dedication to accomplishing every dream that Mr. Toda ever mentioned to him—is the great lesson I learned from his initial meeting. I remember President Ikeda once saying that because he had Mr. Toda deep in his life, he could never lose. I'm sure that most of us, when we encountered Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism — and especially as we began to read President Ikeda's guidance—felt “this philosophy makes so much sense” and “President Ikeda's clear application of the Gosho to our society is so illuminating and encouraging.”

But I believe we cannot stop at that. Even more importantly, each of us has to become a great role model in society. I'm convinced more than ever that in spite of the great economic boom in our country, even more people are searching for a philosophy they can trust—one that will help them feel like they are living the best possible life, the most meaningful life.

I'm filled with excitement and anticipation to learn that SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima just received a new, expansive poem from President Ikeda. While the translation is still underway, I understand it expresses President Ikeda's joy on our recent progress and his hopeful expectation for our brilliant future. How fortunate we are in the United States to welcome Aug. 24, 2000, with such a precious treasure from our mentor's heart.

Through our own human revolution, we have to become individuals who can help people experience the incredible joy of living each one of us is creating. This is perhaps best characterized by the following words from President Ikeda's poem to the men's division last year: “Be big-hearted! Be deep-hearted! Be warm-hearted! Be strong-hearted! There you will find the banner of victory of Buddhist practice.”