

PERSPECTIVE
A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY
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Expectations—we can't avoid them. Whether we try to live up to them or not is up to us. One of the things we hear in the SGI is that we should reply to President Ikeda's expectations. As children, we strive to live up to our parents' expectations, to reply to their love for us. If we are lucky enough to have teachers who care, we strive to live up to their expectations. In becoming adults, we leave the realm of our parents' expectations. As the American poet and author Robert Bly says in *Iron John*, we search for a "second father" or "a second king."

Once we leave the realm of our parents' expectations, whose expectations do we live up to? Our own? Our friends? We tend to set our expectations just within the limits of our comfort zone and do not realize our own potential or genius. It is the mentor who sees the greatness in us that we don't see ourselves who spurs us beyond our self-prescribed boundaries. Bly says that through a mentor "a hint will come to us as to where our genius lies." A mentor helps us "rebuild the bridge to our own greatness or essence."

As Bly explains, living up to the expectations of a mentor is not about pleasing someone else or feeling burdened. It is about the process of self-discovery through the mentor–disciple relationship. President Ikeda, as a mentor and teacher, is encouraging us to realize our potential.

In early Europe, craft guilds were opportunities for youth to leave the realm of their parents and apprentice under master craftsmen—and become masters themselves as masons or carpenters. In the artists' studios, students would paint some of the less-important background scenes. Under the guidance of masters of various fields, youth developed their skills.

In *The Human Revolution*, the character Shin'ichi Yamamoto, representing a young President Ikeda, left the realm of his father's expectations and entered into that of his mentor in life, Josei Toda. As depicted in the book, Toda visits Shin'ichi's father one day and asks, "Will you entrust Shin'ichi to me?" After contemplating Toda's character, and acknowledging Shin'ichi's feelings for Toda, his father consents. Toda exclaims: "How splendid! I, Toda, will be entirely responsible for Shin'ichi. Please set your mind to rest" (vol. 6, pp. 106–08).

Shin'ichi chose Toda as his mentor at their first encounter as depicted earlier in the book. It is important to note that the disciple chooses the mentor. A mentor does not recruit disciples or say, "Follow me." We must see the greatness in the mentor and decide for ourselves. Bly states: "We can each ask ourselves: Is there anyone we know or have heard of who possesses true greatness? If so, we should leave with him or her."

Early in my youth I faced a huge test in my relationship with President Ikeda. I loved him from the first and considered myself his disciple. But I was very young and had no clue about the obstacles that I would face in the future.

After a particularly severe setback in my life, I felt that I had failed as a disciple. Before I realized it, I was overcome with negativity. "I have failed him," I thought. And my heart broke. I had to think deeply about what he really meant to me. What is a disciple? What does a mentor think about a disciple?

I came to understand that I had a very shallow view of the mentor–disciple relationship.

When I realized that President Ikeda's belief in me, his belief in my potential, was unconditional, I was able to pull myself out of the depths of that hell.

One reason I like the book *The Eternal City* is because the mentor–disciple relationship between Bruno and his mentor, David Rossi, is tested. Although he believed himself to be a strong disciple, Bruno is forced to wrestle with doubts over his relationship with his mentor.

In his case, he was faced with doubts about the character of his mentor. In my case, I was faced with doubts about my capacity as a disciple. Bruno was also forced to examine his relationship with his mentor on a deeper level. Malicious and false accusations about Rossi had come to Bruno's attention while he was in jail. He asked himself: "Really, what kind of man is he? What do I really know about him?" Through profound contemplation, he awoke to the true character of his mentor and dispelled his doubts. He came to understand what his heart already knew.

In my own examination of my relationship with President Ikeda, I realized that, by assuming that he would give up on me or be forever disappointed in me, I was discounting his capacity and compassion. He doesn't expect that we won't stumble at times, but he does expect that we will stand back up and carry on.

We can get focused myopically on what others think of us. "He doesn't believe in me," or "She doesn't like me," or "I wasn't appointed to this position because they are against me." But we are all comrades in faith, standing shoulder to shoulder, not front to back, following our mentor, President Ikeda, not one another.

Many years ago, I happened to be in Tokyo when a journalist was interviewing President Ikeda. This reporter was marveling at the extensive organizational powers of the Soka Gakkai. As he was asking President Ikeda how he had achieved this, the reporter started describing the typical organizational pyramid—all the members at the bottom and layer upon layer of leaders up to President Ikeda at the top. President Ikeda stopped him and said that is not how he views the Soka Gakkai.

He took out a pen and drew a straight line with a point in front of it like this:

He explained that the line represents all the members of the Soka Gakkai and the point is himself. There is no separation between President Ikeda and each member. He is no closer to top leaders of the organization than he is to the newest member. There is no one between our mentor and us. When we obsess on our organizational position or the opinions of others, we are viewing ourselves in that mythical pyramid.

President Ikeda has said that he writes so much because one-to-one dialogue can only reach so many people. I believe that is why SGI-USA General Director Nagashima says that President Ikeda wrote the July 21 poem, "Soar — Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century," to each of us. President Ikeda doesn't write for a mass audience. I think he feels he is indeed writing to—touching—each of us. I heard the mentor–disciple relationship explained once as the mentor being like a transmitter and the disciples like receivers. President Ikeda is always transmitting. It is up to us to receive the message.

Several months ago I heard a young woman describe her struggle with the mentor–disciple relationship. She was devoted to her practice, to kosen-rufu and her members. She was acting as a person of the same mind as the mentor. But although she respected President Ikeda and thought he was "a great guy" as she put it, her heart was closed to him. And this troubled her. She was frustrated by the fact that she "just didn't get it." This was something she pondered through many prayers.

Then one night as she was standing alone out under the stars at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, she had an awakening, a realization. It was a matter of trust. It wasn't President Ikeda; it was her ability to open her heart to him. Her father had been a very respected professional, but behind closed doors he was an abuser feared by the family. She realized that this was the "wall" between herself and President Ikeda. All of her chanting and prayers had led her to see this and suddenly she "got it" and tears began to flow down her cheeks. Her receiver was turned on.

When a mentor touches our hearts, when we are confident that he truly cares for us, we are motivated to reply to his expectations.

How could you not want to reply to someone who says to you—as he once said to me: "Tell me what I can do for you. I will do anything for you," and mean it with all his heart.