

SPECIAL YOUTH  
PULLOUT SECTION

# SEIZE The Day

## Understanding the Mentor-Disciple Relationship

### SGI-USA Zone Youth Leaders Share Impressions

The following are impressions from selected SGI-USA youth zone leaders from around the United States about the mentor-disciple relationship and how it became relevant to their lives.

#### **Matt Anton, Northeastern Zone Youth Leader**

I think most Americans share a healthy distrust of leaders and leadership. Every time a leading political, religious or cultural figure is involved in scandal, our suspicions are deepened. Many leaders are considered corrupt, and this sense of skepticism extends to how we view leadership within the SGI organization. It's very difficult for us to believe that SGI President Ikeda is what he appears to be — a man completely committed to building a culture of peace on a global scale. In the back of our minds, we might have the nagging thought, "Yeah, but what's in it for him?"

However, seeing is believing. A particular turning point for me occurred during a dynamic culture festival held in Hawaii in 1985. Never before had I seen so many people unite for the cause of peace. And the man whose guidance and encouragement had made it possible was President Ikeda. Every time I participate in an SGI activity, my sense of profound respect and deep admiration for the efforts of President Ikeda grow stronger and stronger. I am proud to call President Ikeda my mentor. ☉

#### **Joe Baykun, Western Zone Youth Leader**

What was my turning point in the mentor-disciple relationship? There was no grand epiphany that occurred amidst lightning bolts and earthquakes. My relationship gradually evolved out of a desire to be happy.

My practice began amidst the hectic rhythm of activities in the '80s. My sponsor, an eccentric, artist friend, carried something in his heart — something profound and unshakable that managed to provide an anchor of sanity for me. It was his desire to reply to President Ikeda. No matter how absurd the times, his actions and life always conveyed the deeper message of this philosophy.

The hope and desire for human happiness that burned in my friend's heart slowly began to rekindle that same forgotten dream in my own. And the source of his undying commitment was the trust he had in Daisaku Ikeda. It was his action and care for us, and his ceaseless devotion to President Ikeda that awakened a desire in me to know more about my mentor.

There are many moments in my life that helped define and strengthen my relationship to President Ikeda. It is definitely the behavior of his disciples and their commitment to human happiness that makes this relationship real. ☉

#### **Beth Lamure, Southern California Zone Youth Leader**

The mentor-disciple relationship has made such a difference in my life and in the way I practice and view Buddhism. It has been the single most thing that has brought me the greatest joy and benefit in my practice. It has also been by far the most difficult part of Buddhism for me to grasp. To say it pushed all my buttons and made me want to run out of a room whenever it was mentioned is still putting it mildly. But what is it exactly? Is the mentor-disciple relationship something separate from President Ikeda? To understand mentor-and-disciple, do we also have to understand President Ikeda?

That was my toughest part. I could deal with having a mentor in life or understanding that I could learn something from someone, but when it came to President Ikeda, that was where the real struggle was for me. I chanted often about it and asked many questions about him. I studied his lectures, poems, dialogues and books. I came to my own conclusion that he is a truly great man who has lived an unimaginably courageous life. After much contemplation and struggle, I realized that I would be truly fortunate to have him as my mentor in life. It is an ongoing process to deepen my understanding of the mentor-disciple relationship and President Ikeda but a process that I now truly enjoy! ☉

#### **David Eisenberg, Northern California Zone Youth Leader**

I have practiced this Buddhism for almost 20 years now, but the point where I really began to understand the mentor-disciple relationship was in 1993, when President Ikeda visited San Francisco.

One night, a special event was planned for him at the house where he was staying. The idea was that his car would arrive and he'd immediately be able to enjoy our performance. Instead of going along with the program, President Ikeda turned around and walked over to me. I had been having a very long week and didn't have the highest life-condition at that moment. He took my hand in his and looked at me in the most reassuring way imaginable. I felt I had no need to worry!

I learned at that moment that a true leader, a true Bodhisattva of the Earth, cares much more for others than for his or her own pleasure. President Ikeda is the one person who shows me 100 percent of the time what it means to be a Buddhist. Because he is teaching me how to live my life to the fullest, I have chosen him as my mentor. ☉

(“Impressions...” continued on Page D)



Matt Anton



Joe Baykun



Beth Lamure



David Eisenberg



Cathy Kishi



Osamu Kaneko



**T**his year, seven of the Florida Nature and Culture Center conferences will be geared toward youth. These are precious opportunities for us to deepen our understanding of Buddhism through youthful exchange. It's key to keep in mind that many participants go to the FNCC because someone close to them took the time to share the value of going. Quite simply, going means growth.

Think of how in a forge, steel is shaped and hardened at its hottest, most vulnerable moment. If properly treated, forged steel will emerge with resilient structure and incredible durability. Relating this to our own lives, since strength is the necessary foundation for true success, we can liken the workings of a forge to our days as youth.

These difficult times are the precise opportunity to lay the foundation for becoming brilliant, noble people. Such development involves many aspects, but one of the most central is our warm interaction with friends in a nurturing environment. The FNCC was designed for this purpose. We can build great futures for ourselves there. SGI President Ikeda declares that the exertions we make this year will determine our capabilities for the rest of our lives. These FNCC conferences will be a crucial part of this advancement.

**Young Men's Division Conference:**  
**July 5-8**

**Focus:** As the future of the kosen-rufu movement in America, young men will gather from across the nation to celebrate the historic 50th anniversary of the founding of the young men's division. This conference is for any young man who desires to better himself, fulfill his dreams and contribute to our movement. Together, we will unite for the second set of seven bells and create a glorious history based on President Ikeda's vision for America and the 21st century.

**Who can attend:** Open to all young men's division members ages 13 and older.

**Young Women's Division Conference:**  
**July 12-15**

**Focus:** Young women will open the gateway to the 21st century. This is your opportunity to learn from the heroic stories of other young women from around the country. Any breakthrough or dream you seek, you will find some anecdote, some friend that will take you by the hand, some presentation that will stimulate your mind and heart to seek further. This will be the time to uncover your true self and shine—to answer the questions you are facing. The conference will focus on the mentor-disciple relationship, home visitation and using the Goshu in our practice. Other themes include Soka Spirit and sharing Buddhism with friends and family.

**Who can attend:** Open to all young women's division members ages 13 and older. In particular, we would like to encourage young women in their 20s to attend.

**Youth Performing Groups Conference:**  
**July 19-22**

**Focus:** Talented youth performers will unite to learn the basics of faith, practice and study and form lasting bonds of friendship while deepening our shakubuku spirit.

**Who can attend:** Open to all youth division members ages 13 and older.

**Student Division Conference:**  
**Aug. 2-5**

**Focus:** At the Student Division Conference, we want you to experience a blossoming of joy and harmony from within your life. We will learn to never lose heart based upon our friendship, our faith and the heart of President Ikeda. This heart is the altruistic desire to seek one-on-one education that fosters a love for humankind and develops our character. This summer, let's realize our infinite potential and change the world.

**Who can attend:** Open to all student division members, college or university students, or any youth seeking to attend college or technical school in the near future.

**Jr. High & High School Divisions Conference:**  
**Aug. 9-12**

**Focus:** The new millennium is here, and the SGI-USA Jr. High and High School Divisions are ready to take the stage of kosen-rufu! We're excited to announce that we will be holding the 5th Jr. High and High School Divisions Conference this summer. In keeping with this year's SGI theme, "The Year of Total Victory for the New Century," we're determined to make this a groundbreaking conference, one that will electrify and inspire a whole new generation to take leadership in creating a Century of Life.

**Who can attend:** Open to all junior high and high school students ages 13 and older.

**Youth Peace Committee Conference:**  
**Oct. 18-21**

**Focus:** The SGI-USA Youth Peace Committee will sponsor an international youth conference focusing on the United Nations theme for the next decade, "A Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World," and Victory Over Violence.

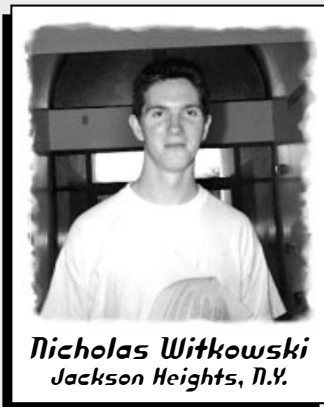
**Who can attend:** Instructions on eligibility for participation in this conference will be published by the YPC in an upcoming edition of the *World Tribune*.

**Youth Division Support Groups Conference:**  
**Nov. 15-18**

**Focus:** "Raise the Bar" is the challenge we have taken as members of BSG—Byakuren, Soka Group and Gajokai. In our 1st BSG conference of the new millennium, we will unite as youth, pledge to protect our mentor and precious members and proudly declare victory!

**Who can attend:** Open to all youth division members involved in BSG or who wish to join in the future. Must be 13 and older.

# Impressions of Last Year's Student Division Conference



**Nicholas Witkowski**  
Jackson Heights, N.Y.

**A**fter a period of time, when I was not practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, I reintegrated myself into the SGI after attending the Student Division Conference last summer at the FNCC. By meeting with other students who seek to transform their environment in accordance with the guidelines President Ikeda has laid down for the student division, I was able to renew my commitment to practicing this Buddhism with absolute confidence of its validity.

The conference directed my practice by constantly pushing me to reevaluate my relationship with President Ikeda. The question I have asked myself each day since then is: "How can I promote kosen-rufu as a student in accordance with the will of my mentor in life?"

What a wonderful opportunity we have as students to unite each year and reaffirm our commitment to our mentor and ourselves. I am so excited and look forward to seeing all of you again this summer! ☉

I attended many workshops during the few days at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, but what I valued the most was the time spent meeting and having dialogue with my fellow student division members. We shared experiences, laughed together and cried together. I was able to open my life to others as well as to myself.

I was so encouraged by the students I met and inspired about how they started campus clubs at their colleges. I was fired up to return to the University of California at Los Angeles and establish our own campus club!

That following November, a few other students and I got together to establish the UCLA Value Creation Society and held our first introductory meeting! I am currently the president of UCLA's VCS club and am determined to win in my studies and share this beautiful practice with my friends and classmates. I will never forget the day we established our club, when UCLA's clock tower chimed SGI President Ikeda's favorite song, "Ode to Joy," all throughout the entire campus.

My heart is filled with so much compassion for all student division members and I will do my best to continue chanting vigorously every day to encourage and support those I met last summer at the FNCC! ☉



**Kevin Michael**  
Goleta, Calif.

**N**o words can truly express the joy and gratitude I have for attending last year's Student Division Conference. It profoundly affected my life. Not only was it a great learning experience, but a great opportunity to make some new life-long friends.

I had the benefit of talking with great people like Daisaku Leslie, James Herrmann, Wendy DeSouza and Danny Nagashima. I can honestly declare that my life condition had never been so high in my life.

Upon my return to Santa Barbara, I was brimming with residual energy that lasted for over a month. I felt so much energy and compassion welling up from my life.

The grounds on which the FNCC are located is breathtaking. The food was excellent, the weather gorgeous and nothing was left to be desired.

I encourage everyone to attend at least one conference at the FNCC. I guarantee that it will be a life-altering experience! ☉



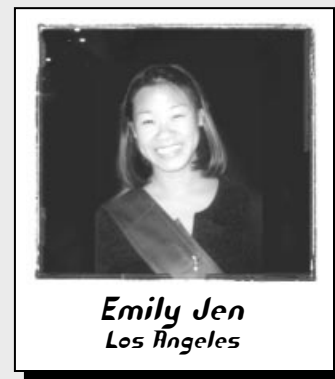
**Mitsuko Noro**  
Allston, Mass.

**T**he opportunity to meet and spend time with 180 seeking students from all over the United States was an amazing experience. Each participant convinced me that world peace is not a far-off dream.

I felt President Ikeda's heart the whole time and came to realize his expectations toward us are enormous. I went home full of determination to respond to President Ikeda.

Soon after, I was appointed the New England Region student division leader. There are four campus clubs in the New England region. Many of the students who went to the FNCC conference became region-level leaders.

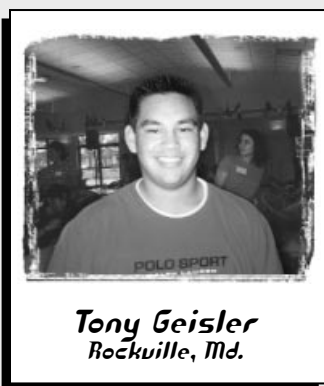
The trip to the FNCC became my starting point and I will never forget the determinations I made there. ☉



**Emily Jen**  
Los Angeles

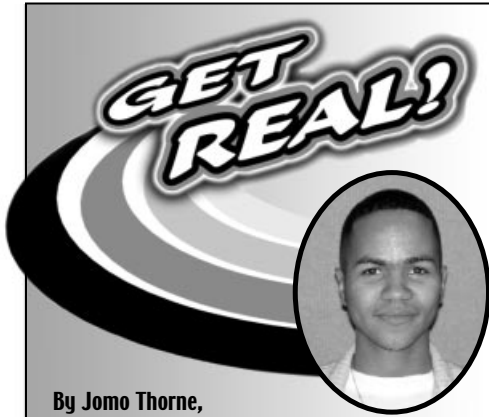
**G**oing to the FNCC is an experience that I cannot easily describe. Last summer, I made my fifth trip there. Again, I was blown away at the good time I had. No place in the world gives me a better feeling of euphoria. Everyone has heard about the FNCC's great facilities and amazing food, but there is so much more.

There is no better place to be encouraged or to renew your faith; I have done them both. The friendships and bonds provide a lifetime of memories. The amount I have learned is phenomenal. I feel like a new person each time I travel there.



**Tony Geisler**  
Rockville, Md.

There is nothing better than meeting new people and seeing old friends. Hanging out with people your age that you can relate to is such a great feeling. Few things can combine fun and spirit all in one. The experience is forever and I implore everyone to go and taste the life of the FNCC. ☉



By Jomo Thorne,  
SGI-USA High School Division Leader

## What's Soka Spirit? Why does it matter?

"The Daishonin also strongly urges Tokimitsu to fight bravely, with all the spirit of youth, against the attacks of evil authorities. ...'Fight back fiercely against evil. That is what it means to be young!'" (SGI President Ikeda, April 6 *World Tribune*, p. 6)

**M**ost teens in the SGI-USA haven't had a lot of experience with Nichiren Shoshu priests or temple members. We hear a lot of talk about "the Nikken sect," "the temple issue" and "Soka Spirit," but for many of us these phrases don't mean a whole lot.

I think that the best way for teens to understand why SGI President Ikeda focuses so much on fighting against the priesthood is by asking three questions: What is good? What is evil? Why does it matter?

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is based on the belief that all people have the potential to achieve enlightenment. We chant and do activities to bring out and experience the wisdom, compassion, joy and vitality we call Buddhahood. Because we all have a Buddha nature, we are all inherently equal. Since Buddhism is about helping every single individual become happy, from a Buddhist point of view, good is anything that improves human life and evil is anything that leads people to misery.

All of us have probably heard the term *sansho shima*. In English it means three obstacles and four devils. The devils here are not little red guys with horns. Devils are the forces in our lives that prevent us from realizing our Buddhahood, interfering with our advancement. Devils can take many forms. They can come from within — as illness, laziness, depression — or from our outside — as arguments, mishaps and so on. In the Goshō, the

Daishonin refers to the strongest type of devil as "the devil king" or "fundamental darkness." This fundamental darkness is our ignorance of the fact that inside, we all possess the means to achieve absolute happiness.

This fundamental darkness makes people look outside themselves for happiness and security. In a sense, it makes people insecure about the possibility of living a happy life. Some exploit these insecurities to relieve their own. Fighting against this negative human tendency is what lies at the heart of what we in the SGI-USA call Soka Spirit.

Nikken Abe, the man who holds the position of high priest and chief administrator of Nichiren Shoshu, claims that all people aren't equal. He claims that people can only experience the benefits of Buddhist practice by blindly following him. Playing on the temple members' tendency to look outside themselves for salvation, Nikken is leading them down a path of great suffering. Based on the previous definition, the behavior of Nichiren Shoshu under his leadership is clearly evil.

If we don't fight against the priesthood now, millions of people could fall victim to this evil. From a broader point of view, if we as teens don't learn to oppose evil abuse of power wherever we see it, in the future we will let ourselves be manipulated by corrupt authority figures. This is why we need to learn to make Soka Spirit our own. ☉

(*"Impressions..." continued from Page A*)

### **Osamu Kaneko, Central Zone Youth Leader**

In 1991, after four years of practice, I made a huge mistake that made me lose confidence in myself. I was almost suicidal because I was not sure of the value of my life. I cried and cried, but finally managed to drag myself in front of the Gohonzon. I never felt such tremendous difficulty to chant even one time.

The fundamental darkness in my life prevented me from chanting. I said myself, "If I cannot chant now, I will never be able to face the Gohonzon for the rest of my life." I forced myself to chant until it became a rhythm. After forcing myself for 15 minutes or so, I then started feeling like I didn't want to stop chanting until I found the answer to why I had to struggle so much.

I finally realized how arrogant I was in making the mistake I had. I realized that if I had followed President Ikeda's guidance sincerely without my biased interpretation, I would never have made such a mistake. I had thought I understood what the mentor-disciple relationship means, but I didn't understand at all. I felt so ashamed, but afterward, I felt the strongest desire to find an answer so that I would not suffer again.

As I was chanting, I awakened to the fact that I need a role model, someone that I follow to lead me to a higher state of life. I wondered, "Who in this world is leading a life without regret and with a full sense of mission, justice and joy?" I could not think of anyone but President Ikeda. Tremendous joy welled up from my heart and I thought how fortunate I am to have a mentor like President Ikeda.

I pledged to the Gohonzon that I would follow his example. I found that the genuine mentor-disciple relationship lies in challenging myself to actualize each encouragement that my mentor puts out for me. With President Ikeda, I can win. I am convinced of it. ☉

### **Keli McHale, Mid-Atlantic Zone Youth Leader**

In June 2000 at the Young Women's Conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center, my life experiences became clear to me. The mentor-disciple relationship came alive in my own life! I realized that because I didn't believe in my own life as a Buddha, I had a big block to understanding this relationship. If I couldn't believe in myself, how could I muster up confidence in my life to challenge the grand vision of taking full responsibility for world peace?

Last September, while attending the SGI Fall Youth Training Course, I was able to report to President Ikeda my 10-year struggle of finally believing in my life — never to doubt my life, no matter what! While I was seeking to understand the mentor-disciple relationship, I realized I was looking outside myself for the answers to questions I had about my life, trying to compare myself to someone else or trying to be something I was not. This year, I have made my promise to President Ikeda to shoulder full responsibility of our wonderful legacy to the best of my ability. ☉

### **Cathy Kishi, Pacific Zone Youth Leader**

As a teenager, I sought out the correct way to live. When I was 16 years old and going through a personal struggle, I was told there would be a culture festival and that President Ikeda would be there. I didn't care to attend any meetings, but I really wanted to meet the person many affectionately called "Sensei." Through seeking him, I was able to learn more about this practice, meet new friends who truly cared for my happiness and experience a sense of joy that overflowed from within my heart.

Because of President Ikeda, I have continued my practice. Whenever I feel discouraged, I read his guidance. This gives me the hope and energy to continue my practice and challenge my difficulties.

I still don't really understand the full significance of the mentor-disciple relationship. I think it is something we have to strive for our whole lives. Recently SGI-USA General Director Danny Nagashima shared that the greatest freedom we have as human beings is being able to choose our own mentor. With appreciation to be a youth member during such a significant time in history and advance forward with President Ikeda, I will strive to do my best. ☉