

Believing In Yourself

Master Dharma Teacher Barbara Rhodes was one of Zen Master Seung Sahn's first American students. She has been studying with him since 1972 and was given his authority to teach in 1977. She leads retreats and gives talks at centers of the Kwan Um Zen School around the country. A registered nurse since 1969, she has been working as a charge nurse in the Jewish Home for the Aged in Providence, RI, for the past ten years. She lives at Providence Zen Center with her husband and daughter.

It was wonderful for me to hear everyone share of themselves this weekend. It convinces me once again that we're all one big family. I hope we keep sharing our Dharma with each other. As it has been mentioned already, there is a tendency for human beings to separate, to think "my practice is the best." We build walls, names and ideas. It's a human condition and it's very destructive. We are very lucky in this country because we have this opportunity to share ideas. But we have to make an active effort or it's not going to happen. There's a pull toward separation all the time.

I was sitting in a sesshin with Sasaki Roshi last May. It was about the fourth day of the retreat. I was about to have my sixteenth interview. Things were so different from what I'm used to with

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Soen Sa Nim. I had answered a couple of his questions, but there was one kong-an that I had been trying to answer for a day and a half and I kept thinking, "Where is my mistake?" All of a sudden a wave went through me, this wonderful feeling that I've had before many times. All of a sudden I had gotten it.

You have to believe in yourself. It's not so much that he was looking for a word, he was looking for a belief, a confidence to just have it come out... believing in yourself. Then I went up and answered the kong-an. It was the same answer I had given two hours earlier. I just had confidence. I didn't care what he said. That is how I thought of the title for this talk.

The past several years many of the Zen Centers in America have been having trouble. All of those things that we think of as hard times don't really have to be a hard time at all. All of those things are your teacher. Arrogance, laughing at someone, laziness, are different traps. You say "thank-you" when anything appears. 1983, 1984, thank-you. All of the things that appear in this universe are for each one of us. Then there's no winning and no losing anymore. That's real freedom: freedom from life and death, from winning and losing, from pride and arrogance. Freedom from everything.

I led a retreat in Toronto last weekend. It was wonderful, nice weather, more people than usual, and everyone felt good. We always have a circle talk at the end, and share something about the retreat. Several people told me they only see a teacher about every three or four months. They seemed hungry and grateful. You could say anything and they wanted to hear it. It's really easy, especially to say something nice. They almost draw it out of you. So three of the people who had been at the retreat took me to the airport the next morning. They said things like, "I can't wait until you come back", and "It was such a great retreat". They were full of admiration, and I saw the orange caution light appear.

That's dangerous, this attachment of

people liking your teaching or needing and wanting you. It weighs exactly the same as someone saying "Thanks a lot, but I'd rather have so and so come up and teach. You weren't so great." Good speech or bad speech, if either one touches you more than the other, you've got problems: clinging, grabbing, not believing in yourself.

If you need good words to feel good about yourself, then it's devastating when someone gives you bad words. Neither one needs to touch you. At the same time, it's wonderful if someone tells you your teaching is inadequate and shallow. It's the same thing as "Wow, it's great, I can't wait until you come back!" Your mind doesn't need to move with either. You can feel a little sad about one reaction and a little proud or happy about the other, just happy that you make people happy. But then that feeling is gone and you're getting on the airplane, watching an old lady trying to pick up her heavy bag, helping her to carry it.

You're right there the next moment. I think that's the goods you get from sitting and practicing. That is Zen — being able to answer the next moment with no trace of the last.

I want to share one story that's been helpful to me. When Soen Sa Nim, my teacher, had been in this country for six or eight months, everybody was always asking him questions about Korea, Buddhism and enlightenment. Somebody asked him if there were any women Zen Masters in Korea. He said, "No, women can't get enlightenment."

I just looked at him. He gave these wonderful dharma talks about "don't make man, don't make woman, don't make anything". So I said, "Soen Sa Nim, you always say originally there is nothing. Don't make distinctions. Don't make good and bad or man and woman. What do you mean women can't get enlightenment?" I wasn't angry, I was just shocked that he was saying that. He looked at me and said, "So you're a woman!"

"I am a woman." "I am a man." Already enlightenment has passed through your fingers. It's not a thing. You can't get it. Nobody can get it. Buddha didn't get it either. So we don't have to worry. We're all in the same family and that's wonderful.

An eminent Zen teacher once said, picture yourself as an insect with sensitive antennae. How they stay alive and find their food depends on those antennae. To attain, or understand yourself, you can't let those antennae



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move at all, not one tiny vibration from either of them. They have been completely still.

In a sense he's saying that any phenomenon appearing in our life makes us check or doubt ourselves or others by thinking and separating. If the antennae or the mind moves just a fraction of an inch, you've already gone straight to hell. That's why enlightenment sounds so difficult. How could we ever be so clear that our minds don't move at all, that we can always just be there? The only time that the antenna is not moving at all is when you're meticulously paying attention to

each moment.

So it's not the dishwasher or the ninety-day retreat. Either one is food for our practice. One is not better than the other, although sometimes one is more supportive than the other. We have to become sensitive and balanced about those things and it's not easy.

Soen Sa Nim once gave a talk at the end of our 90-day winter Kyol Che retreat. He told about the high class Zen student, who only has to hear one word and he or she gets it. The second-class Zen student needs to sit a 7-day retreat and then gets it. The low-class Zen student has to sit 90 days and then gets it. So he asked, "Did you get it?"

Most of the people in the room began feeling horrible, doubting themselves, their practice. Then Soen Sa Nim immediately said, just now, even this mind that doubts itself, this is enlightenment. It's "I didn't get it" enlightenment." He said it so compassionately and beautifully. It felt like he'd taken out a silver tray with 25 beautiful little cakes on it, one for each of the people in the room, their favorite flavor and color. Enlightenment cakes. I



Photo by Ruth Klein

didn't get it, and that's it! Just believe in yourself, this mind this moment.

I really want to encourage people to find a teacher and a practice, anything that helps you practice consistently and to your fullest. It doesn't matter who the teacher is or what the form is. If you decide to get up in the morning and do 108 bows, to sit 20 minutes twice a day, or do a retreat twice a year, whatever it is, get yourself to do that.

We all have this resistance to practice. It's not an easy thing to practice hard. Sometimes we have to force ourselves to pay attention. We could be doing any kind of practice as long as it means mindfulness and consistency and accountability to someone. It's important to get some feedback about your practice once in a while.

There's a story that goes with that. Up in the 7th Heaven, the King of Kings of all the heavens and the universe was sitting on his throne, feeling tired and old and thinking it was time to pass on his responsibilities. He looked at his attendant and said, "I want to find a person to replace me: the perfect compassionate, all-knowing person. I'm ready to retire."

The attendant said, "How can we find this being?" The King of Kings said, "Don't worry. There's a certain fellow that I've had my eye on." It was Shakymuni Buddha, in one of his previous incarnations.

So the King of Kings went flying down over the different realms and found the Buddha in a cave. The King manifested himself as a hawk, and had his attendant manifest himself as a dove. The hawk soared around and made threatening moves toward the dove, right over the

Buddha's head.

The Buddha looked up, very compassionate and loving, and saw the dove's predicament. He yelled up to the hawk, "Please don't attack that dove. Don't eat it!" The hawk said, "Why not? I'm hungry".

Buddha replied, "Oh, the dove will suffer so much! Please don't kill him". But the hawk said, "I'M HUNGRY!"

So Buddha said, "You may have one of my fingers to eat." The hawk produced a scale and put the dove on one side of the scale, which dipped way down. Then he said, "Give me an equal amount of meat and I won't eat the dove."

So the Buddha chopped off his hand and put it on the scale. The scale barely moved. The dove was much heavier. Then the Buddha cut off his forearm and put that on the scale, but the dove was still much heavier. He continued to dismember himself to try to equal the weight of the dove, but everything he offered didn't weigh enough.

This great question of how much can I give, how hard should I practice, appears when our practice is genuine. In this story we're racing through Buddha's mind, the great caring mind of "what can I do?" until finally he gets it. Because he had a strong question and a strong direction, he got it. He put his whole self on the scale and then it was much heavier than the dove. Then of course the hawk manifested himself as the King of Kings, and the Buddha became whole again.

This is a very lofty old story. We tend to think we couldn't be that compassionate. But that's our situation at the moment, seeing other beings in distress. Because we're not sensitive enough, most of the time we don't even see that distress, or sense the sadness that is going on around us. The longer we practice, the more we begin to see the suffering of others as well as our own suffering and faults.

It's at this point that a lot of people draw away from practicing. As you become more aware and sensitive, you think you're worse than you were five years ago, but you're not.

The day after my Toronto retreat where I had been so "wonderful", I was at work and I couldn't get one of my patients to swallow her medication. I was very tired and eventually lost my temper, and had to get one of the aides to give the pill. Walking down the hall I could see my frustration, my lazy karma, my laziness enlightenment. Soen Sa Nim would call that "losing it" enlightenment.

If you can't see that in yourself, you can't teach anybody else. You can't share or be anybody else's friend unless you see those things in yourself. So when you are losing your temper, take a good look at it. The next time you see someone else acting that way, there's no separation — you have complete understanding and maybe you can give that person support. That's our job.

So they loved me in Toronto and the next evening I'm an impatient, weary nurse. Which one is correct? KATZ! I hope we all learn to believe in ourselves and help others. □



*zen master Seung Sahn
screaming like some lunar banshee
bandit
smashing steel and stone to dust
killing once each night forever
the thousand mile beast
of endless promises.*

Michael Steinberg

