

## GROWING PAINS

By Editor-in-Chief Ellen Sidor, with contributions from Master Dharma Teachers Barbara and Lincoln Rhodes and Jacob Perl, School Director Richard Streitfeld, and Contributing Editor Shana Klinger.

In the past few years the Kwan Um Zen School has been experiencing a difficult transition, the nature of which has only recently become apparent—the shift from the authority and leadership of our founder and Zen Master to a sharing of these responsibilities between him, the School Council, and his six American Master Dharma Teachers. After 14 years of teaching in America, now Soen Sa Nim is spending less time here and more time abroad. The American school is being expected to function more on its own.

While many of his older students perceive this as a loss and react with different emotions, others perceive it as the inevitable separation of a growing-up child and its parent. We are grappling with the difficult task of beginning to fill the gap that our powerful and charismatic teacher is purposely leaving. It is a challenge to find our own ways of maintaining our centers, teaching without him, growing and fund-raising. "If I stay in one place, you will not grow up," Soen Sa Nim says. "Zen means, 'become independent.'"

Already there are numerous new students in the School who have not met him and who regard the American Dharma heirs as their real teachers. To some people this is a welcome development, others are not so sure. However, it has placed a great responsibility on the American teachers, none of whom has been a monk or practiced for more than 15 years. The six Master Dharma Teachers (two were named in 1977, two in 1981, two in 1984) have needed time to deal with their own lives in relation to becoming teachers, to get to know and trust each other. It is not surprising that they have shown the strain of this position at times.

The Master Dharma Teacher group is the second "leg" of the governing stool, of which Soen Sa Nim is the first. It has the function of making teaching decisions along with Soen Sa Nim, and making decisions in cases where an individual or center is experiencing difficulties.

The third administrative "leg" is the School Council, which has been in existence only three years, although most of its members have been students of Soen Sa Nim for up to a decade or more. The Council has about 18 members from Zen Centers around the country, meets three times a year, and operates by consensus. In the beginning, it was difficult to feel credible as a governing body.

It took time for the Council members to get to know each other and to work as a team. Often there were situations that arose between Council meetings that called for speedy action, and consensus over such distances was impossible. Some decisions were reached by the School Staff through consultation with Soen Sa Nim and the Master Dharma Teachers by telephone. Other decisions were made by Soen Sa Nim alone and discussed later with the Council. This process has inevitably created some serious communication glitches.

Over time the face-to-face Council meetings have proven to be a good clearing-house and healing process. The realization that the Master Dharma Teachers and the Council could give useful group feedback to Soen Sa Nim has solidified the effectiveness of both groups. At the recent April Council and Master Dharma Teacher meetings, a new sense of clarity and cohesiveness emerged, in large measure due to our having to deal with several difficult issues.

### Looking at the Zen organism

If you have been reading other Zen publications in this country over the past few years, it becomes apparent that we are all going through a similar process. We are all experiencing, in one way or another, the growing pains of Zen. It is often helpful, in the middle of what seems to be just a particular, personal struggle or crisis within one group, to see the universality of the growth process.

Here at the Kwan Um Zen School, as elsewhere, the scenario is becoming familiar: an event occurs or comes to light concerning a teacher. It may provoke severe disapproval and

Eventually some common ground is reached. Through the process of sharing, practicing, suffering together, a new consensus and a new relationship to the teacher emerges. Guidelines are discussed and written down. There is a reshuffling of the hierarchy, sometimes a decentralizing. Large organization shrink or subdivide, new groups spring up. When the smoke clears, the landscape has changed a little.

Perhaps now there are fewer of the original pioneering teachers from the East who are still in supreme authority in their sanghas, or their sanghas are smaller. Some teachers and students have parted ways. These relationships need to be completed in a clear way. Deserting a "stuck" relationship is like not finishing a koan. Some people have left Zen practice over these incidents, but others have gone into it more deeply. For those of us who have stayed, who imagine we are going to be doing this for the long haul, there is a less idealized view of reality and a new sense of humility. The air is clearer.

In a talk last July, Soen Sa Nim cautioned the Kwan Um Zen School Congress that it was now, as an embodiment of his teaching in the United States, 14 years old—in other words, an adolescent. He warned us that the next few years would be stormy as this adolescent begins to deal with the issues of taking responsibility, communicating with siblings, developing an identity that is separate from its parents. It's a helpful image that seems to describe what is happening in many sanghas. We're growing up and it's a turbulent time.

It's easy to get hung up on being judgmental about some of our teachers' behaviors. There have perhaps been abuses of power and position, of sex. The mystique of robes, shaven heads, Buddhist images, exotic rituals are still a powerful, often shocking, counterpoint to a good deal of American culture. Whether we greet the trappings of Zen with enthusiasm, wariness or outright dislike—the tradition of patriarch, the unquestionable authority of roshi and Zen master, the sternness of the monastic discipline—an important truth is being obscured. Growing up (with or without the help of Zen) is an extremely personal, visceral matter.

It helps when we can see what we bring to the task: idealism, high hopes, the wish that our teachers can ease us through the process. The fundamental job is still often painful, calling for persistence, or perhaps desperation. Rage, arrogance, sadness and confusion are part of it, as is joy. But after the hoorah of dealing with crisis (inspired by teacher behavior or whatever) dies down, the basic task is still at hand. This is our Zen. What is it going to be? Just now, what is our relationship to our teachers? What ways can we embrace them and effectively offer this practice to others, so that we can begin to digest our American Karma?

### Lay practice and monasticism

Zen is still very young here. When the first blush of romanticism and idealism wears off, we have to deal with the nitty-gritty of getting family life, career, relationships and Zen practice into some kind of harmony. At best it's a precarious balance which never seems to hold for long. Part of the reason for that is that we have, as yet, no American Zen tradition to fall back on, no established role models for the "complete" American Zen layperson. We discover this when we try to rely strictly on the Eastern models which have been brought to us.

One of the thorniest challenges to American Zen will be to see whether it can fashion a lay practice which actually works. Some of us, harboring monasticism in our hearts, deal with the daily burden in part by dreaming of a future time when we can put it all aside. Some of us have already chosen some form of ordination, and are trying to live it in a secular and materialistic America. Most of us, however, live a non-monastic life, embracing families and cars and jobs, trying to find a right livelihood and peace of mind, while being fully engaged in a complicated society. What kind of practice, what traditions can we fashion that will help us balance all this, and perceive our True Self?

Basic to Soen Sa Nim's (and other Zen teachers) teaching in America has been the establishment of Zen Centers in which people can pursue a more rigorous practice and live and work together. The rigid schedule calls for strong determination. But the attraction of families to these centers, and the natural movement of most older students toward marriage and family life, has created a whole set of interesting, frustrating issues that are becoming familiar to all the lay sanghas of American Zen. These issues revolve around the tensions of commitment to formal practice and the demands of family and economic life.



Zen Master Seung Sahn



photo by Ernie Leveque

### NOTE TO OUR READERS...

Starting with this issue, PRIMARY POINT will now be publishing three issues a year instead of 4, and will be 16 pages instead of 12. You can expect us in February, June and October. Copy deadlines will be January 1, May 1, and September 1.

confusion within the sangha. Some members of the sangha react with anger and hurt. Gossip flourishes. Emotional letters are sent.

The event polarizes people. Suddenly the whole panoply of opposites arises: we are men or women, students or teachers, monks or laypeople, residents or nonresidents, leaders or followers. Opposites are painful. In trying to resolve them people begin to reveal their true feelings. Meetings are held, facts are shared. Everything is looked at: the teacher, the hierarchy, the practice, the decision-making process, one's personal life and commitment. Although some people leave the sangha, others stay. Some turn in their robes/authority roles, others opt for the sidelines to await developments. Lots of people feel a great learning process, and some wounds, also.

A basic paradox of a Zen Center is that without some people who commit themselves to a single life in order to keep a strong core of practice going, the paired and married older students are moving away from formal practice just when newer students need them the most.

Soen Sa Nim has tried to establish a monastic community in America, but it has been very difficult. As many monks have left the Kwan Um Zen School as have joined it. When he first came to the United States 14 years ago, sensing a fertile field for Zen in the independence and open-mindedness of the American hippie, he introduced the traditional forms of the Korean Chogye Zen. Little by little he has had to modify many of them to fit the American character.

Most recently, despite strong disapproval from the Chogye Order in Korea (which for decades has fought to represent the single monk tradition), Soen Sa Nim created the role of "Bodhisattva monk," a lay person who makes a greater commitment to practicing and helping others, yet may marry, have a career and so forth. This option has been attempted by more people so far than the single monk role. It remains to be seen whether these seeds will flourish or not in America.

If we always cling tightly to the familiar, the parental, we will break no new ground. In the long hour of the history of Buddhism, American Zen is merely the last few seconds. Here's trusting that in our American passion for analyzing and scrutinizing things so closely, we don't miss the sweep and humor of the grand overview. □