

Empowering Ourselves as Dharma Teachers

by Dennis Duermeier

A tradition of the Kwan Um Zen School was revived recently when a Dharma Teacher Yong Maeng Jong Jin was held the weekend of March 18-20, 1988 at the Kansas Zen Center in Lawrence Kansas. In the past, Dharma Teacher Yong Maeng Jong Jins were held at least twice annually and were an opportunity for people becoming Dharma Teachers to receive some training and grounding in the Zen lineage as transmitted by Soen Sa Nim. Unless senior members of local Zen Centers took the initiative to offer more teaching, often the only formal introduction new Dharma Teachers received in Kwan Um Zen School style of Buddhism was a necessarily compressed run through of Compass of Zen and the Dharma Mirror, Soen Sa Nim's manuals for Dharma Teachers.

In recent years, the Dharma Teacher Yong Maeng Jong Jin was eliminated and training sessions were scheduled some-



time during the weekend of the Kwan Um Zen School Congress. The training had, in fact, died out in the crush of the weekend's events. Thus, formal training for Dharma Teachers within Kwan Um Zen School, already minimal, has been decreasing over the past few years. At last year's Dharma Teacher Association meeting (held during the School Congress), many people expressed a strong desire for more formal training and for the return and expansion of the Dharma Teacher Yong Maeng Jong Jin. Stanley Lombardo, Abbot of the Kansas Zen Center, strongly agreed and offered the Kansas Zen Center facility for the retreat. This was the genesis of what became "Empowering ourselves as Dharma Teachers and as an organization."

As the title suggests, over the months of planning, the weekend had evolved into less of a training session and more of an opportunity to take an in-depth look at what it means to be a Dharma Teacher. What are we learning and teaching, and what teaching and practice forms are we inheriting and developing? Too often in the past, Dharma Teacher Association business had been relegated to the odd moments after school congress or council business had been conducted. The March weekend was an almost unprecedented opportunity for a relaxed, unhurried look at just what a Dharma Teacher's job is.

The participants were almost all older committed students of Soen Sa Nim's. The categories of students represented were Dharma Teacher, Senior Dharma

Teacher, Master Dharma Teacher, Bodhisattva Monk, and Full Monk. This expressed both the seniority of the participants as well as the perhaps confusing variety of forms existing within Kwan Um Zen School. Some basic questions were being asked: What are the expectations of a Dharma Teacher or a Senior Dharma Teacher? What is the difference between Dharma Teacher and Bodhisattva Monk? How do we teach? What do we teach?

The retreat began Friday with regular morning practice, breakfast and some free time before the formal events. Several people elected to take a walk around the Kansas University campus. (Snow had fallen the night before, but the morning was brilliant, clear, and bracing. Throughout the weekend, in typical Kansas fashion, the weather ran the gamut from winter to summer, but it was beautiful. It was an incidental but important aspect of the suc-

cess of the weekend.) The retreat began with a circle talk on the theme, "What I would like to get or give this weekend."

Soen Sa Nim spoke last about the Dharma Teacher's job. Very simply, the Dharma Teacher's job is to translate what has traditionally been a monastic practice into a lay practice- to change from the old to an emerging new style. The Kwan Um Zen School has always stressed *together action*, acting, practicing with other people. Recently, Soen Sa Nim has been very explicit about this aspect of our practice being the departure point for the "new" Zen. The "old style" emphasized enlightenment first, then gradually, with cultivation, karma disappears and one acts freely and correctly in all situations. In a sense, together action approaches the process from the opposite direction. People acting together, right from the beginning, with all their karmic sharp edges intact, is an excellent method to perceive karma and over time, make it disappear. As Soen Sa Nim says, "If karma disappears, then whether you get enlightenment or not is not important."

The problem with the old style is that it tended to become isolated and rarefied, losing its connection with ordinary, daily life. Many historical Zen schools died out for this reason. So the Kwan Um Zen School's style of lay people living together and practicing together is a new development in the history of Zen. It is the job of Dharma Teacher to translate the essence of Soen Sa Nim's Dharma to a form which is intimately involved in

daily life and to ensure that the connection is not lost.

After a short break, the conference divided into smaller groups of five or six to facilitate discussion and share concerns in a more intimate atmosphere. Ideas and issues generated were reported to the group at large Saturday morning and led to some of the most productive work of the entire weekend. (see below)

Following a round of sitting and lunch, Mu Deung and Soen Sa Nim gave a talk on the Ten Precepts. Soen Sa Nim explained that the precepts he gives people are identical to traditional monk's

prospective Dharma Teachers. It was suggested that Soen Sa Nim be asked to give a series of talks working his way through the Compass of Zen. The transcribed talks would be the core of a revised Compass of Zen.

3) Another issue many people are dealing with is finding some balance as a lay Dharma Teacher. The role of traditional monks and nuns is very clear- their lives are given to practice. However, many Dharma Teachers find balancing a serious commitment to practice or a Zen Center and the demands of a family, job, education, social life, etc., very difficult.

"When and how do we teach new students?"

precepts and while the first five are applicable to everyone, the second five are not particularly relevant to lay people. There have been some attempts at developing or modifying precepts to make them more current and Soen Sa Nim is formulating new ones for Dharma Teachers.

Saturday morning began with practice and the opportunity to hear Soen Sa Nim give a short talk on chanting, and do the morning bell chant solo and Korean-style. The Saturday morning session heard reports from each of the small groups and discussed the ideas that emerged. Some of the main themes were:

1) Why become a Dharma Teacher?

And the corollary: Why is there such a high attrition rate, (almost 50% over fifteen years)? Discussion focused on taking precepts for social or "status" reasons or perhaps being subtly or not so subtly pressured into becoming a Dharma Teacher. There was a suggestion to make the waiting period between five and ten precepts four years and emphasizing viewing it as a privilege rather than duty. The consensus was that the current two year period is long enough. This issue was related to another, specifically...

2) Should the cognitive aspect of our teaching be more emphasized now that most Dharma Teachers understand the primary importance of daily practice? What and how do we teach new students? Is there a need for some sort of "standardization" or at least formal training com-

There are no clear cut forms or guidelines, inevitably so, since in some ways, we are making it up as we go along. While it's true that most people can do far more than they think they can, for many people, the result of being spread too thin for too long has been burnout.

4) Several people voiced concern over how to help people with serious psychological problems who come to the Zen Center. Most people seemed to agree that it's important to balance compassion- the desire to help, with wisdom - the ability to acknowledge your limits. Some people need professional help, and compassion in that case may mean helping them get it.

After the small group issues had been reported and discussed, Soen Sa Nim joined the discussion and answered questions on many topics. He gave his views on many of the above issues, but he also answered questions that many people had had for years and only now had a chance to ask.

For example, he explained the significance of the objects on the Zen Center altars: They represent the four elements of earth (rice), air (incense), fire (candles), and water (water offering). He explained the meaning of the morning bell chant: "Everything must wake up!" He again explained why the chants should not be translated, or if they are, that translations should be placed in the back of the chanting book rather than beside the phonetic syllables: "Meaning is not im-

"Many Dharma Teachers find balancing a serious commitment to practice or a Zen Center and the demands of a family, a job, education, and a social life very difficult."

mon to Kwan Um Zen School? Should the chants be translated? Perhaps here is the place to note that some people felt that one of the benefits of becoming a Dharma Teacher is that it almost forces one to become more conversant with the teachings. It's necessary to learn something about what you're teaching. These questions led to some very fruitful ideas on expanding and clarifying the Compass of Zen and making it a "primer" for

portant. All chanting is Dharani. Kwan Um Zen School style is the same everywhere; if side by side English translations are used, chanting books could not be used in other countries.

Soen Sa Nim said the Dharma Teacher Association must become a strong cohesive organization and suggested instituting a Dharma Teacher training course. Prospective Dharma Teachers would master Compass of Zen, then be

tested about it before being allowed to take precepts. There might be a yearly training course for all Dharma Teachers, followed by an exam. Saturday afternoon the small groups each had time to meet with Soen Sa Nim to discuss issues more privately. The Saturday afternoon large group session was productive, with several concrete plans and changes adopted:

1) Soen Sa Nim agreed to give a series of talks on *Compass of Zen*. The transcribed talks will be edited into a training manual for Dharma Teachers.

(Editor's note: Soen Sa Nim has already given these talks, and the transcribing is underway.)

2) *Dharma Mirror* will be revised and updated. It will have some additional teaching, be generally livelier, and an index will be added.

3) The currently available translations of the chants will be checked for accuracy and revised as necessary. The English translations will be added to the back of the new chanting books.

4) There will be an annual Dharma Teacher Yong Maeng Jong Jin. Next year, it is scheduled for March and again at Kansas Zen Center.

5) The Dharma Teacher Association governing board will be drawn from Dharma Teachers attending the annual Dharma Teacher Yong Maeng Jong Jin and will be composed of three Master Dharma Teachers and four Zen Center Head Dharma Teachers. The membership will rotate regularly. The current body is composed of:

Bobby Rhodes-Providence Zen Center, Richard Shrobe-Chogy International Zen Center, Judy Roitman-Kansas Zen Center, Nina Davis-Chogy International Zen Center, Robin Rowedder-Seattle Dharma Center, and Jonathan Bowra-Empty Gate Zen Center

Saturday night, everyone (thirty-two people) went out to dinner at a local Chinese restaurant, which was great fun, and then returned to the Zen Center to sprawl on the floor and watch a video (Star Trek IV).

Sunday was a crazy high energy day. The final morning session offered a dharma talk by Richard Shrobe on the "Dropping Ashes" kong-an and on connecting

kong-ans with our daily lives. Soen Sa Nim again stressed the role of Dharma Teachers in keeping Zen practice vital by ensuring its involvement in everyday life. There was a closing circle talk and lunch and many people had to leave to catch planes. For those who stayed, the activity was non-stop for the rest of the day. There was a precepts ceremony in the early afternoon. Ron Sutherland and Hwei-chi Yang were married by Soen Sa Nim in a well-attended, Buddhist ceremony at a local country club and then gave a talk at the Kansas University campus in the evening.

A terrific amount of work was accomplished during the retreat. That it was so productive owes a lot to some of the intangible aspects of the weekend. A warm, family-style atmosphere prevailed: a strong unbroken sense of sangha. There was plenty of free time for relaxing, taking walks or talking with old friends. One of the small groups walked downtown Saturday afternoon, shopping for gifts, visiting a bookstore and eating ice cream. The retreat was simply a lot of fun and very energizing.

Many people worked hard to pull off the weekend so successfully. It was wonderful that Soen Sa Nim came with his usual humor, clarity and energy. With so many events scheduled, particularly on Sunday, it was taxing, and everyone was grateful for Soen Sa Nim's effort and teaching. Richie Streitfeld, Bobby Rhodes, Nina Davis, Karen Ryder and Stanley Lombardo all worked very hard organizing the retreat, setting an agenda, and generally making an idea real. Many thanks also to the Kansas Zen Center members who gave their time, work and rooms as needed. Particular thanks go to Carole Hojun Welker and Marla Wambsgans who spent the weekend cooking up terrific meals. Finally, thanks to everyone who attended and made the retreat happen. The Kwan Um Zen School is a far-flung entity and it's often easy for individuals or whole Zen Centers to feel isolated. There is inestimable value for all of us in getting together face to face for whatever reason and realizing that Sangha is more than just a word.

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Human Survival Conference

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ments, but as individuals representing the human family. The goal of the conference was to create an interaction and on-going dialogue in order to enlarge all of our capacities to deal with global, life-and-death issues.

The selection of participants was guided by the desire to bring together leaders known for their dedication, enthusiasm, integrity and courage. Participants included the heads of the Church of England, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Russian Orthodox Church; emissaries from various churches of the United States; a representative of the Pope (who was the organizer of the World Interfaith meeting at Assisi last year); Mother Teresa; prominent leaders of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism (including the Dalai Lama); and leaders of the Hopi Indians of North America and native religious groups of Africa. Political leaders included the representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, American congressmen and former ambassadors, and former presidents and parliamentary leaders of governments from all over the world. There were also international media leaders and scientists from England (James Lovelock), Africa (Wangari Maathai--Kenya), the U.S.A. (Carl Sagan) and the U.S.S.R. (Evgueni Velikhov--Vice President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences). Poep Sa Nim was the only female Buddhist master at the conference.

The entire assembly convened each morning in the beautiful Oxford Town Hall for speeches and discussions on various current topics. In the afternoon participants broke up into small working groups in order to enhance personal contact. In these working sessions each participant was invited to speak. One person

said that in this age we should all follow women. Poep Sa Nim responded by saying, "in the absolute world there is no woman and no man. In one life we may appear as a woman, in the next life maybe as a man. Because of that we should not attach to our form. Not only man and woman, but also with countries, religions, etc., we should not attach to our form or situation. If you attain the absolute world, from which we all came, your actions and speech will automatically help others. This is the basis of human survival.

"We all have 10,000 intelligent ideas and have been talking a great deal. If we cannot harmonize together, how can we help and lead others? Why don't we all stand up, hold hands and practice together so that we can share energy, let down our barriers and attain this absolute world." The whole group then did as she asked while chanting "Om Nam" together, raising and lowering their arms, chanting fast and slow.

Afterwards, there was a lot of animated discussion and a relaxed atmosphere among the participants. During a tea break and at dinner that night, many people expressed their appreciation for this practicing. People were able to taste the one mind and energy which appears when barriers are let down.

On the way home Poep Sa Nim was asked for her observations on the participants of the conference. She said, "generally speaking, the political people are more open than many of the religious people. They are looking for solutions to serious everyday problems and are more open to experience, energy and new ways of looking at things. Religious people tend to protect their ideas and positions more. Often they are following someone else's idea or their own beliefs and are less open and less able to go before-thought. That's not good and cannot help this world."

Dharma on French Radio

by Poep Sa Nim

In February of this year Poep Sa Nim was invited to talk on a radio show in Paris. The following talk is a partial transcription from that event. The questions were telephoned in by people listening to the show.

Question: I don't know much about the Asian religions. What is Buddhism?

Poep Sa Nim (PSN): Buddhism is not a religion. We practice Zen which means finding your true self. Because of that, I cannot say that Buddhism is a religion. Everyone would like to find themselves, who they really are. Buddhism appeared to show people the way to find truth, which, in fact, exists prior to and independent of any religious form. This means not following someone else's idea.

We have many lives, not only this one. For most people, when they exist, their human body is their world. We forget our true self and we attach to this present body, present form. This form is made up of the six senses—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. People think only of and do action only through these six senses. We follow the senses and then, when we get old, we don't know why we have lived this life. Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Many people have these questions. So, Buddhism is to show you where

you came from, where you are going and how to live this present life correctly, without having any objective or subjective conditions.

We receive this human form and it is built by the four elements. We form this body and then forget what nature wants us to do. We only attach to our body. When you attach to this body it has objective and subjective conditions, which means like and dislike, right and wrong, good and bad. If you keep following like/dislike, right/wrong, and good/bad you only follow objective things. That's what human society is fighting about. Right and wrong, good and bad. But Buddhism means, conquer this objective/subjective action to find what is before this condition. This means that before-thinking is our true self. This before-thinking does not have any condition; there is no attachment. Your mind is clear like a mirror. When your mind is clear like a mirror you see things as they are. For example, when someone appears before you, because your mind is clear like a mirror, it reflects that person and you see their mind—their before-karma, present-karma and future-karma. But, only perceiving is not enough. This before-thinking is absolute energy or what I call complete energy. As you know, right now you are listening to the

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