

Honoring the Teacher, Honoring Each Other

by Ken Kessel

This article grew out of a discussion at the Kwan Um Zen School Council meeting this past December. There were questions about the implications of being more formal in the relationship between student and teacher. We have a Teachers' Group consisting of Dae Soen Sa Nim and the Master Dharma Teachers, which meets regularly to discuss, clarify and decide matters of formal teaching. There is an ongoing dialogue between the Teachers' Group and the Council. While the Teachers' Group has ultimate responsibility for decisions about teaching, they inform and get feedback from the Council in matters that affect that teaching. The Teachers' Group has initiated some changes in the formalities of the relationships between student and teacher, and the Council has concurred in the value of these changes. This article will describe two major changes, then will explore corresponding questions and implications.

Part of the power of our practice is that it is what we choose to make it. Entering the Dharma Room and bowing to Buddha could be the act of praying to a statue. It also could be a reaffirmation of a commitment to practicing by engaging in the clear and simple act of "just bowing". Similarly, according a degree of formal respect to the teacher might be a confirmation of the hierarchical and possibly patriarchal nature of the relationship. I could also choose to make it an opportunity to reaffirm and reengage in my practice, to renew my vow. Being aware of my weaknesses, my desire, anger, and ignorance, I find value in the forms of bowing, chanting, and sitting. Entering into these forms, I become balanced and more able to give myself to the forms of this world.

My teacher's role is to remind me to practice and to guide me and in so doing, to remind me of the Dharma. For this, I am grateful. Thus, when I see my teacher, I bow to the Dharma, to our own Buddha-nature, and renew my practice. My teacher sees me, is reminded of a teacher's responsibility, and

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We will be addressing the Master Dharma Teachers by their Korean title, *Ji Do Poep Sa Nim*. "Ji" means "to point," "Do" means "way" or "path" as in the Chinese word "Tao". In common Korean usage, "Ji Do" means a map or guide; it literally means "Pointing the Way." "Poep" means "Dharma"; "Sa" is "Teacher" or "Master," and "Nim" is an honorific article, appended to a title to show respect. This title, then, refers to *one who is a guide to or provides a map of the Dharma*. The implication is that one teaches by example, and, by the conduct of one's life, points the way of the Dharma. A rough equivalent would be "Dharma Master."

For formal introductions, as for talks, brochures and ceremonies, we will refer to the teacher by their name plus "Ji Do Poep Sa Nim," e.g., "Jacob Perl, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim." (We thought it would be easier to use the English name prior to the title.) Following the spoken or written introduction it is fine to refer to the teacher simply by their name plus "Poep Sa Nim," or just by "Poep Sa Nim." When addressing a teacher directly, as when asking a question during a Dharma Talk, it is also permissible to simply address him or her as "Poep Sa Nim."

Second, we will be according the Poep Sa Nims appropriate respect in the Dharma Room. Thus, during retreats, we will bow to the teacher one time (before morning bows). After bows and after practice, the teacher will leave the room first, while we stand with hands folded. As always, both before and after interviews, the teacher sits with hands in hapchang, while the student does a full prostration.

One of the attractions of our school has been its relative informality. Council members and Teachers were both concerned about whether these changes would adversely affect the student-teacher relationship or people's practice. The intention was that by requiring greater formality, there would be greater respect and thus greater seriousness about practice.

We were also concerned about the possibility that increased formality would alienate teacher and student. Here are some personal reflections emanating from my experience of practice.

also bows to the Dharma. Why have a teacher? Why have a Buddha statue? They remind me of my True Self. Bowing to my teacher or to a statue is, then, a selfish act. I do it for me, for the Dharma, not for the teacher or the statue. And if I just bow, then Buddha, Dharma, teacher, me, and the statue are gone. There is just bowing, and my practice at that moment is full and renews itself. I bow and I find my Self. This is a model for giving myself fully to any relationship. Thus, I give respect to my teacher for myself, and at the same time for all beings.

To receive such respect is both a practice and a responsibility. Respectfully receiving such acts is a public reminder of one's responsibilities; it is both an encouragement and a goad to practice. The relationship of teacher and student is reciprocal, not hierarchical. Each receives, each gives; and this mutual recognition creates Sangha. In these acts, we both recognize and recommit ourselves to our own Buddha-nature, to the Dharma, and to the Sangha. Any formality is subject to misinterpretation and abuse. Mutual and clear understanding of the purpose of what we do will allow us to use the forms of our practice wisely.

Ken Kessel is a Senior Dharma Teacher and Abbot of New Haven Zen Center.

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just keep suffering and fighting with each other. It has been this way for centuries. The little bit of history I've read is pretty strong evidence that it hasn't changed too much and that we may be doing it all over again. Maybe it's a difficult time right now, but it may be a great time to help us put aside this trivial stuff that we're involved with and get into another arena that is a little more valuable. I always understood that people got old and died and got killed in car accidents, but it wasn't until it happened to me, and somebody sitting right there died while I was holding them, that I really got it. You hear of such things but if you experience them you get a little dose of reality, and it's not just an idea anymore.

Question: But realistically isn't it all futile?

Rhodes: Realistically, if you want to be really realistic, what else can you do? I remember one time in my life I never would have imagined bringing a child into the world. It seemed like things were so crazy, I wouldn't have wished that on anyone. Since then, I have a different way of looking at things. Yes, my daughter is going to have a lot of suffering and joy. A lot of suffering because things are pretty crazy but whatever you do for this child someone has done that for you. You know that your parents took care of you. But it is not until you really do it that you understand that someone taught us how to go to the bathroom and where to go.

This world would be a terrible place if we all decided not to bring children into it because it's not so nice, to spare them from it. It's also not an attitude that will contribute to the long term health of the planet. The best thing we can do is to try and do the best job so they will be better prepared than we were. You have to have both of those things at the same time: there is suffering and joy and beauty; it's all together. It's not just one or the other.

Before I heard about Zen, I had a wonderful experience, kind of like someone answered a koan for me. I was a graduate student at M.I.T. and there was a professor there whose name was Houston Smith; he had written some books on religions. He showed a movie which depicted an interview he had with Krishnamurti. He was a professor and an intellectual and he sat there and asked questions and Krishnamurti gave him answers. What intellectuals do when they don't understand is agree with the other person and repeat what they've said, using synonyms so it sounds like they know what they're saying. Krishnamurti would say something precise and exact and Houston would say "Yes, what you're saying is..." and Krishnamurti would say "No, that's not what I'm saying..." This went on constantly during the interview and it made Professor Smith look foolish. Krishnamurti said, "What is love?" and Houston Smith said love is when two souls intertwine and merge...etc. Krishnamurti said, "No! No! Love is desire and hate and anger and joy and sex." When Houston Smith had said his beautiful thing I went for it, I loved it. Then Krishnamurti wiped it out with the truth.

Question: Dae Soen Sa Nim says, "You are already dead." I read this poem which ended with: "Dead from day one." Do you have any sense of this *Dead from day one*?

Rhodes: What is this *I* which we consider alive or dead? What am I? We have a whole bunch of ideas about it, it's our image of us—not great looking, but not too bad, pretty smart and sort of clever. We have this whole thing that we call by this name that we go by. And we think: I'm sort of a victim, or sort of helpless, or I'm sort of not talented, or I'm sort of stupid, or whatever. We have an image and a picture. Sometimes it gets frayed and we fix it up, try to acquire new skills for it. This is something we're trying to keep alive and what Dae Soen Sa Nim means is: *This is dead*. Yes, we do this, but that is not us and we need to get rid of it. It's real and exists, but in another way it doesn't. It's like the Bogeyman! Dead from day one.

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