

On Being a Student

Editor's note: Reflecting on my being a teacher, it occurred to me that it has deepened my appreciation of being a student. We asked our teachers to contribute some reflections on the experience of being a student. Here are three responses.

The world is full of suffering. How can it be stopped?

Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

I don't really think of Zen students or Zen teachers. I think of Zen practitioners. We are all practitioners, whether we practice a lot or a little. Whether as a student or a teacher, our job is to practice. For those of us who are laypeople, we will sometimes be able to practice a lot, and sometimes only a little. But we need to keep practicing. As students, that is the biggest gift we can give our sangha. As teachers, that is the bone of teaching. But how do we encourage each other?

I was going through the Kwan Um website and came across a letter that Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) wrote to her sister in 1978, a year after receiving inka but long before she was Zen Master Soeng Hyang. She was about to sit a 100-day retreat, and her sister wanted to know why. Bobby wrote, "The world is full of suffering. How can it be stopped? Every human being has a seed of compassion and wisdom that must be very carefully nurtured. It is our responsibility to find this seed and do everything we can to make it grow.

"First, you must believe that you have this seed. Then you must ask yourself with all the strength you have, 'What is this seed?' If you truly search for it, you will understand that everyone is just like you. Everyone has it. You will have no more desire for yourself; you will only want to teach everyone how to find their seed.

"Enlightenment is believing in yourself. Enlightenment is finding your seed. But your job is not over yet. Your mind must become strong enough to be totally wise and compassionate moment to moment in any situation."

So that's what we need to do: find that seed and nourish it to flower into compassion. To see this seed in others so that, without our having to say anything directly, their own seed is encouraged to flower.

That's what Zen Master Seung Sahn was like. He

didn't have to say it directly, but it was clear that he really believed in us. And that's what we have to offer each other: to really believe in each other. To believe in our don't-know mind, our strong center, our direction. To believe in our Buddha nature: yours, mine, everyone's. To me, that's the essence of being a Zen student: practicing and nourishing that seed in ourselves and in everyone else.



Photo: Courtesy of Kansas Zen Center

My Teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn

Zen Master Gu Ja (Namhee Chon)

My life seemed quite OK from the outside while I was a young student. But deep inside of me I felt a sense of disorientation, confusion and the meaninglessness of this life. I believed that there must be a person or a book that could reveal to me the one hidden truth. And once I knew of this truth, my life would change for the better. I devoured all the books that I could get into my hands.

Like an Indian sage who climbed onto the roof of his house and called for the students to come to him, I called intensively and sincerely for a teacher. I went to