

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

India several times to find a teacher. There I met some teachers. The first time I took dust from the feet of a teacher and put it on my forehead—as was the custom in India—I was overwhelmed with joy. It was the very first time I deliberately put down my ego and pride. It was only then that I noticed that my ego and pride could have been a burden for me for long time.

After some years of traveling and searching for the one good teacher, I was staying for a while in a Tibetan monastery. While there, by chance I came across one of Zen Master Seung Sahn's books: *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*. Since Zen Master Seung Sahn was of the same Korean origin as myself, and the book gave me the impression that he was a strong and clear teacher, I yearned to meet him soon. Very soon after, I became acquainted with practice in the Kwan Um School of Zen. Out of the blue, Zen Master Wu Bong, whom I met only briefly during a retreat, called me and Roland from America and asked if we could organize a retreat in Berlin with Zen Master Seung Sahn. Then Zen Master Seung Sahn actually came to Berlin, as if he'd heard me calling out to him.

To be honest, my first encounter with Zen Master Seung Sahn did not convince me of much. My idea that the right teacher will immediately cast a spell on me did not come true. So I kept checking him, his teaching, his speech and his actions for years. In that case, my checking meant to compare the teacher with my idea of perfection. Disillusioned that I could ever learn from him the one truth, I asked him one day if he could recommend a book that would show me the truth, or if he knew where I could go to learn it. Zen Master Seung Sahn only shook his head while making a clicking sound with his tongue: an obvious sign of disapproval. His reaction left me feeling ashamed. From that point on my focus shifted slowly into silent meditation in order to look for the truth in my mind, rather than from outside.

Several times during retreats, when I was suffering miserably from pain caused by my mind and body, Zen Master Seung Sahn told me, "You look good!" I remember that after hearing it each time, I would run into the bathroom to check what he possibly could have seen in me except the apparent tiredness and mental pain. Was there anything that is not affected by any kind of circumstances and stays clear all the time? If he could see it even though I could not, still there was hope and solace for me that I would see it by myself one time.

One day, upon seeing Roland and me and knowing that we had just returned from our trip to India, Zen Master Seung Sahn asked us, "How was India?" Before I could finish the sentence "There is so much suffering in . . ." he strongly said "Bullshit!" and simply walked away. It was as if I had suddenly received a strong blow

on my head. I felt so hurt and upset by his saying that. My strong emotion pushed me to sit meditation intensively day and night many long hours a day for several months. Zen Master Seung Sahn's words and actions always had a big impact on me, whether they were gentle or harsh. They worked as a compass that pushed me to one direction—don't know. My trust in his teaching was uncompromised, despite my intermittent emotions and checking.

I had many opportunities, while I stayed in Korea for seven years, to attend the dharma talks given by Zen Master Seung Sahn in the dharma room at Hwa Gye Sa Temple every morning at 8. His health was in bad shape then. It took a long time for him to walk up all the stairs to the dharma room in the top floor of the building. And once he got there it took a long time until his breath calmed down and his sweat dried. Seeing the Zen master gasping for breath always made me sad and worried about him. I was often close to tears. Regardless of his condition and situation, he gave himself completely to teach us, nonstop. My gratitude to my teacher now leads to my commitment to follow his footsteps.

My dearest memory of my teacher is also the sweetest one. It must have been my last interaction with him, since I left Korea soon afterward.

On one sunny day on the temple grounds of Hwa Gye Sa I saw Zen Master Seung Sahn in the distance, standing in front of the big dharma hall. At that time he did not speak much due to his health. He beckoned me to him, and I almost ran there. He took out of his monk's jacket a small candy and gave it to me with a big smile, like a father would to a small child. I thanked him silently with a deep bow. The candy was very sweet, and this sweetness has firmly merged with the memory of my teacher.

Letting Go of the Coin

Knud Rosenmayr JDPSN

We may like or dislike the experience of being a student, but actually this doesn't matter. During my very first retreat at Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Korea, we had a formal breakfast together with all the monastics of the temple, and newcomers were instructed to come forward on the first day and ask the monastery seniors "Please teach me." This can be a bit confusing for a person who was conditioned in the West. But putting the cultural differences aside, in fact "Please teach me" means *being a student*.

In the West and in the East too we really like to choose. We want to choose what we want to learn and from whom we want to be taught and, most important, when or when not. Coming home from a stressful working day, do we prefer to choose a glass of wine or switch